

## Chapter 6

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# Work–Family Spillover: From Conflict to Harmony

Have you ever known anyone who had a bad day at work and then came home and “took it out” on her spouse or kids? This is an example of negative work-to-family spillover – something happened at work that had a negative effect on the family. But there are many other kinds of relationships among the multiple ways work and family and attitudes and behaviors can combine. When the things you do at work make you a more interesting person at home or provide you with skills to deal with issues at home, the work-to-home spillover is positive. Positive spillover is sometimes called enhancement or enrichment because the emotions or activity in one role (mother or worker) strengthen the quality of the other role. Spillover also flows from home to work. The usual assumption is that children are incompatible with high-level success at work, but this assumption ignores the refuge provided by a loving family and how children can provide positive home-to-work spillover. Of course, negative home-to-work spillover also occurs, such as when a problem at home interferes with work.

Sometimes there are direct conflicts between the demands of family and work. One of the most frequent types of conflict for high-achieving mothers is time conflicts. What happens when a working mother has to be at a meeting at work and her child has a doctor’s appointment at the same time? The answer, of course, is that it depends on the specifics, such as whether the doctor’s appointment is for a well-child check-up or for an illness, how important the meeting is, and what can be changed and rearranged.

Unreliable childcare is a cause of much stress for most working mothers. One way in which these high-achieving mothers handle the problem of childcare is by planning for reliable care. The solution

may sound obvious, but it is often difficult to find high-quality child-care. The additional income that comes with high-level careers allows these women to “buy out of” much of the stress that mothers in lower-level jobs encounter on a regular basis. High-achieving women are better able to pay someone to clean their home and provide reliable child or elder care. But, time conflicts still occur because there are some events where mothers need and want to be with their family, which may clash with times when they need and want to be at work. As with all such conflicts, choices are made which lead to a resolution. Most of these women said that their families always came first, but it is important to interpret “first” as a position that was decided upon after considering the circumstances.

Greeting her women friends as we walked to our lunch table at the Los Angeles Club, which is a private dining club in the downtown business area of Los Angeles, Andrea van de Kamp told them that we were doing an interview on work–family balance. They burst into a roar of laughter and teased her that this term must be a joke for all of them. Is it possible for women to have work–family balance?

## Beyond Work–Family Balance

What do we know about work–family balance? Are career women carrying a double burden? The balance metaphor includes the idea that any gain to one side necessarily means a loss to the other, which is one reason why some writers have suggested that we replace the balance metaphor with one that allows for integration or benefits on both sides of the scale (Halpern & Murphy, 2005). Do women with the demands of a high-level career have to give up family in order to achieve success at work? Are they more stressed out than women who stay at home? Anyone who has spent much time with children will laugh at the idea that caring for children all day is not stressful. In considering the lives and choices of highly successful women, we also need to remember that mothers who have made different choices also face their own array of stressors. Staying at home with children is stressful. The work is hard, stay-at-home moms often feel isolated, and their work is often denigrated as being unimportant.

The top women leaders we interviewed show that their overly-full lives are not necessarily more stressful than the lives of other mothers. Do they have to give up family in order to achieve success at work?

Are they more stressed out than women who stay at home? The women we interviewed show that it is not necessarily so. They may be considered atypical, but recent research also concurs. Paid employment does not have a negative effect on women's health. It may even have beneficial effects on women who have positive attitudes toward their employment (Repetti, Matthews, & Waldron, 1989; Tang, Lee, Tang, Cheung, & Chan, 2002; Warr & Parry, 1982). A lot depends on the individual's attributes and the quality of the work role and the family role.

There has been a vast literature on work–family balance dating back to the pioneering study of interrole conflict and work stress by Robert Kahn and his colleagues in the 1960s (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Rhona and Robert Rapoport (1971) raised the concern about work–personal life conflict in dual-career families in Britain. Work–family balance was originally conceptualized in terms of the presence or absence of conflict, with the issue framed from the perspective of the negative condition with work interfering with family or family interfering with work (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). These conflicts occur when there is a scarcity of time, or when the strain or the behaviors of one role make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Many studies have focused on women as increasing numbers break out of their traditional role in the family domain to enter the workforce, giving rise to the prevalence of dual-career families. Work and family used to be seen as separate domains, as this segregation was the typical mode of work for middle-class American males. When these boundaries are crossed, there are spillovers from one domain to the other. Early researchers assumed that work and family roles were incompatible and that conflict must ensue from having multiple roles. These studies looked at the antecedents of work–family conflicts deriving from time spent, role overload, stress and support received in each domain and how they affect the satisfaction in the other domain (Byron, 2005). Job stress, job involvement, lack of work support, and long work hours were related to work–interference–with–family conflict, which in turn was associated with poorer job satisfaction, family satisfaction and life satisfaction, higher turnover, and stress-related illness. On the other hand, family stress, family conflict, family hours and lack of family support were related to family-to-work conflict, which in turn spilled over to

job satisfaction. Most of the research that used this paradigm found that there was a stronger spillover from work to family than the other way round (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007).

Recent theoretical models have taken a more balanced view and consider more complex interactions between the work and family domains, which include both negative and positive spillovers in the work–family interface. Work–family balance is not just the lack of conflict. Michael Frone (2003) articulated a two-dimensional model of work–family interface which includes the direction of influence (work to family or family to work) and the type of effect (conflict or facilitation). In addition to highlighting the interference between work and family, the positive outcome of mutual facilitation or enhancement between the work and family domains is beginning to be recognized. It is interesting to note the way in which assumptions about the negative effects of working and caring for a family have (mostly) blinded researchers to the possibility that, in fact, they may combine in positive ways.

### *Alternatives to Conflict*

In their book, *Beyond Work–Family Balance*, Rhona Rapoport, Lotte Bailyn, Joyce Fletcher, and Bettye Pruitt (2002) argued that the concept of work–family balance is outmoded. They show that the new approach of work–family life integration can promote a more equitable and effective workplace. Stewart Friedman and Jeffrey Greenhaus (2000) raised the overarching question in the title of their book, *Work and Family – Allies or Enemies?* They concluded that time spent working per se is not the problem. Rather, it is the “intense absorption in work that intrudes into the quality of family life” (p. 138). They found that for both men and women, when work and family are not integrated, preoccupation with work coupled with lack of involvement with the family results in dissatisfaction. On the other hand, when work and family are integrated, the two roles can enhance each other. To integrate the two roles, managing role boundaries is more important than just reducing time at work.

From their meta-analysis which reviewed 178 studies on work–family interface, Michael Ford and his associates (2007) found that support from family and work domains is positively related to

cross-domain satisfaction. The experiences, skills, and opportunities gained in one domain can enhance participation in the other domain, thereby promoting greater integration of work and family. For example, women often say they excel in multitasking at work because that is what they do all the time at home. The expertise and network they accumulate at work also expand their personal skills in taking care of their home. They become more resourceful in selecting the products they want to buy or in getting advice on decisions they have to make in their family's affairs. The support they receive in one domain frees up necessary time and material resources for them to be fully engaged in the other domain.

A study using two national surveys in the US showed that women reported a higher level of positive spillover from work to family than did men (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Ni Zhihua, Chairman of the Board of the Shanghai Sanmao Enterprise Company and Vice-Chairman and Party Deputy Secretary of the Board of Shanghai Textiles Holding Company, gave this succinct summary on the interlocking interface between work and family: "Family is a person's spiritual support; it supports you to realize your value to society."

For people working in family businesses, it may be easier to combine work and family. Work and family roles are closely interwoven, and at times indistinguishable. However, the boundaries of work and family could be enmeshed at times.

Zhang Xin is Chairman of the Board and Co-CEO of SOHO China, a real estate company in China listed on the stock exchange which is famous for its innovative architecture projects. Zhang Xin and her husband caught the golden opportunity of China's economic boom and started their company in Beijing after they got married. Before that she was an investment banker and he was a developer. She talked about how their work and family roles evolved:

"We decided to form a company together, so in addition to being husband and wife, we would become business partners. That was 10 years ago. I guess throughout the years, our roles developed to their own maturity. In the early days we had very little idea how to divide roles between us, so there was a lot of trial and error, and mistakes and quarrels. But as we progressed, we each found a niche that fit our characters, that fit our skills, and so now we are very much partners in an equal sense, in making decisions, but also very much separated in the role that we play in leading the company.

In the early days, I had a lot of discomfort, and so did he, in that I would expect him to play the role as more than a business partner, and much more like a husband. For instance, when I had difficulties, I would expect him to come in and give a helping hand; and when he didn't, I would feel terrible and think 'How could you do this, you just don't care about my feelings.' Or I would say something in front of people that he would feel was inappropriate, like me needing a husband and a man. How could I say this in front of people? So in the early days, there were a lot of mix-ups between the private roles and the business roles that we play. But as we progressed, we were able to come into the room and behave just like business partners, and it is nothing more than business partners that we expect from each other in this office or in the business environment. It actually takes years to develop this sensitivity. We're unique because we are business partners as well as husband and wife, so we are naturally woven between work and family."

Zhang Xin continued to describe how she integrated her children into her work life:

"My children are young, so they require a lot of my presence. I try to take only short trips, or when I have to make long trips, I always take them with me. Sometimes it is a little inconvenient, but all in all it works out. Like the May (Labor Day) holidays for instance. The children have two weeks of holiday and I needed to be in the US to speak at the Harvard China Review and then the Asia Society in New York. So I took them along. Some days we work and some days we play; I am so used to mixing all these trips together."

Zhang Xin's situation is unique. In the first place, her family business is very successful. But it is more due to her attitude toward family life that she insists on involving all members in it, including the children. It is also influenced by how she views her interrelated roles: "Both my family and my company are very close to my heart. It is part of seeing myself grow. In addition to my personal growth, it is also a family growth, a company growth. It is all quite interrelated now."

## **Redefining Roles**

Past research on work–family balance has concentrated on distinct roles and external factors such as time, demand, and stressors as

predictors of outcomes in work–family balance. These external factors cannot explain why some people under similar conditions experience conflict while others do not. Increasingly, research is beginning to look at individual-level factors, such as the person’s personality, attitudes, and style of coping, as well as the broader context of cultural influences. Michael Frone (2003) described the personal initiatives that individuals may take up to reduce work–family conflict. He summarizes three types of coping behavior:

*Structural role redefinition* refers to attempts to alter external, structurally imposed expectations. Examples include eliminating role activities, negotiating a reduction in or modification of work hours, reallocating or sharing role tasks, and seeking out and fostering sources of social support. *Personal role redefinition* refers to attempts to alter one’s internal conception of role demands. Examples include establishing priorities among role demands, ignoring role demands, changing one’s attitude toward roles, and eliminating a role. Finally, *reactive role behavior* refers to attempts to meet all role demands. Examples include more efficient planning and scheduling and working harder and longer within each role. (Frone, 2003, p. 156)

### *Structural Role Redefinition*

We often hold fixed ideas without question about what we should do in order to conform to the roles prescribed by social norms. This is particularly true of women when they try to fulfill their roles as wife and mother. They have to perform all the tasks they believe a wife or mother should do and they hold themselves to the highest standards for all of the role-related tasks. They try to become supermoms or superwomen.

It did not take Jenny Ming, President of Old Navy/Gap, too long to realize that her family role could be redefined:

“Very early on I learned that it’s OK to have help. I think as women, we like to think we could do it all. I went through that myself when I first became a mother. At that time I was a buyer, and I was trying to balance traveling and spending time with my new daughter, and cleaning the house and so on. I wasn’t able to do it. Then my husband said, ‘Well, who said you have to do it all? Why don’t you get a mother’s helper to come in and help you? What about a high school student who could help you with cleaning the house a little bit. Or if

you want her to play with Kristin [our daughter], and you could clean. You know, nobody is putting that pressure on yourself except you.’ I know he’s here to help. It wasn’t very expensive to have part-time help, even though we didn’t have a lot of money at that time. So it was very workable having some help. I think she came in for four hours every Saturday morning, nine to one o’clock. And it was an incredible relief. I think that got me to understand that you don’t have to do it all by yourself.”

Likewise, there are times when we can, or have to, restructure our work roles.

Sue Schechter is a former Texas State Representative and Democratic Party Chair of Harris County in Texas. When she was in the Texas Congress, she had to stay in Austin most of the week when congress was in session, while her family stayed in Houston. She did not have good home help at that time:

“I was gone for those four years when I missed most of my children’s activities. They were in third and fifth grade when I first ran. I quit I think when my daughter was in the eighth grade, and my son was between fifth and sixth. I’ve never been a very good balancer. And I’ll never forget sitting one night in the lounge of the House with a female colleague. We were supporting each other over the fact that our children were just not doing well with us being gone all the time. Richard, my husband, traveled a lot. I had a housekeeper. And you know when your housekeeper calls you when you’re sitting on the House floor at 11 o’clock at night and says, ‘I just found your daughter. She crawled out the window and had gone down the street.’ And I’m going, ‘Where’s Richard?’ It’s a terrible feeling because it’s really letting someone else parent the children. So we were talking about that because she was having the same problems. And we were both lamenting about that. We both quit the same term; that was just it for us.”

But Sue did not quit politics. After she returned to Houston, she ran for and became the Democratic Party Chair of Harris County. She is now a general political strategist and is actively involved in organizing campaigns for candidates and recruiting women into the office. At the time of our interview, she was also helping her husband’s campaign for election to a public office. She decides how she can best fulfill her public role:

“I now realize that my time is my own. I don’t have to give every minute of my time to anybody who asks. And that’s why I would probably be different in public office now than when I was younger because then I didn’t know how to say ‘No.’ It’s like people owned you because you were a public servant. I’m learning now. And I spend a lot more time now devoting to a spiritual quest too as much as a professional one.”

We often hold myths about how we can do a good job. Some people may think that working overtime and bringing work home will show their boss that they are good workers. Carrie Yau, the Permanent Secretary of the Hong Kong SAR government, in charge of Health and Food Hygiene, is unequivocal in debunking these beliefs:

“I seldom bring my work home because I think it is not a good habit. On one hand, it creates problems of confidentiality, and on the other hand, I find rest to be very important. I prefer to leave my office slightly later. From my earlier experience, I realize that bringing work home reinforces the tendency of slowing down the work. Therefore I prefer to make good use of my office time, e.g. reduce time on the phone or be focused on the agenda during meetings, and simplify the complicated issues. . . . Now my subordinates realize that their overtime work will not get my special recognition.”

### *Personal Role Redefinition*

Our group of women leaders are very articulate about the way they alter their internal conception of role demands. They say that they can keep both careers and family roles, but they define these roles in ways that are meaningful and helpful to them.

Ma Yuan, former Deputy Chief Justice of the Chinese Supreme Court, aptly defines her family role: “Every one has a family and a relationship. If you cannot give more of your time, you have to give more of your affection and passion. You can grab some time to get together with your family members. You do not have to sacrifice your family to be successful in your career.”

Ma Yuan values her family very much. There had been four generations living together in her family for years and she had always done her very best to be a good daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother. Her colleagues praised her for being a filial and loving

daughter. Her mother passed away peacefully at the age of 100. And that is how the story of *An Extraordinary Close Relationship between Foster Mother and Daughter* (the title of her planned autobiography), mentioned in Chapter 2, came about.

Ma Yuan’s family is harmonious, although there is disagreement now and then, which usually gets resolved eventually. Ma Yuan regarded family as the “warm berth for her little boat.” Only with the love, care, and support of her family was she able to have a successful career and emerge as the first woman senior judge from being an ordinary teacher.

Alice Tai holds the post of Ombudsman, appointed by the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR to investigate and monitor administrative complaints about the public sector. She uses the metaphor of a “safety net” to describe her work–family balance: “I think the key word is balance, not to over-emphasize either work or family. If you were too career-minded, you win some and you lose some. A safety net has to be firm on all four corners in order to hold up. I can separate my public and private lives, by putting on different hats at work and at home.”

Sun Yuehuan, President of China Enterprise Appraisals, the leading assets appraisal firm in China, is a successful entrepreneur in the economic boom. She describes her attitudes toward her work and family:

“I will sacrifice my resting time in order to do things that please my family. I think it is worthwhile. At home, my role is a wife and a mother. At work, I am a leader and a CEO who enables the staff to earn a living. When I am working, I can keep my family out of my mind. There are a number of attributes that are important to my family and career. The first one is being genuine and the second one is personal competency and knowledge in my work. It is said that ‘knowledge is power’ because you can be empowered after you acquire knowledge. Now, I live happily because I have paid much effort, am genuine to others and contributed all I have to society, my company and also my family. My clients respect me very much, and my friends and family have much confidence in me. Therefore, I think being genuine gives you the ability to handle all relationships.”

Similarly, Laura Cha, Member of the Executive Council of the Hong Kong SAR government, emphasizes the importance of attitudes toward one’s career and family roles:

“I can separate work and personal matters. At home, my children keep me humble and I am a normal mother. I think it’s my own personality. I always remind myself not to let it get into my head. I think it’s a problem if you become very different when you are in a high position and confuse yourself with your role/position at work, but I saw a lot of people (in senior rank) like this – they become convinced of their own invincibility. At that time, this attitude will spill over into your family relationships.”

Psychologists often describe cultures as being primarily collectivistic or individualistic. Collectivistic societies emphasize the good of the group, cooperation, and interdependence. By contrast, individualistic societies are more centered on the success of each individual, even at the cost of the larger group. China and Hong Kong are grouped among collectivistic societies; the US, Canada, and the UK are grouped among individualistic societies. Research in Chinese societies shows that work and family are viewed as interdependent domains, unlike the distinct segregation of these two domains in Western concepts of work and family. In individualistic societies, overwork would be considered as taking time away from the family and sacrificing the family for the advancement of one’s own career. In collectivistic societies, overwork is likely to be seen as sacrificing oneself for the family, since commitment to work is viewed as a means of ensuring financial security for the family (Yang, Chen, Chao, & Zou, 2000). The needs of the self are subsumed under the needs of the collective.

It is not so much the time spent on various tasks that causes stress for high-achieving women in collectivistic societies, but it is relationships that matter. Women in collectivistic societies report that interpersonal conflict, such as a clash with a coworker, is more stressful than handling the simultaneous demands of a high-pressure job and caring for children (Lai, 1995). We explore these cultural factors in greater detail in Chapter 7 where we address the influence of culture on the way these high-achieving women fulfill their duties and engage in the joyful work of mothering and a high-level career.

### *Reactive Role Behavior*

There is a limit to the extent to which we can redefine our roles and change our attitudes about them. There is some flexibility in both

roles, but it is not endless. We still have to meet the daily demands of the roles we fill – being a mother and being a high-level executive. As seen earlier, in order to meet all their role demands, many of our women leaders managed to fulfill both role expectations by working harder and longer, sacrificing their resting time and personal interests. They sleep less, “stealing” the extra hours to finish their own work after their family go to bed. They see fewer of their own friends and for extended periods of time, and especially when their children were growing up, they rarely did anything for their personal enjoyment outside of work and family. They also work smarter by having better planning, scheduling, and strategizing.

## Life Management Strategies

What are the practical tips for managing these demands? Recent research has examined the strategies that promote a better work–family interface. Boris Baltes and Heather Heydens-Gahir (2003) extend a general model of life management strategy to study work–family conflict. They classify the repertoire of adaptive behavior strategies as “SOC”: Selection, Optimization, and Compensation.

### *Selection*

The primary focus of selection is on the articulation and setting of goals, which give direction to behavior. This strategy is similar to writing a mission statement for yourself because it clarifies who you are, what you care about, and how you will achieve the desirable outcomes you listed for yourself. Limited resources, including your time and your money, are then channeled to achieve these goals. This strategy is similar to Friedman and Greenhaus’s (2000) first principle for creating allies of work and family – “clarify what’s important” (p. 146).

Our women leaders are very clear about their goals. This is how Andrea van de Kamp looked at her work–family balance: “If you’ve really thought about it, you’ve decided what’s critical and what isn’t. And if you look at it that way, you will have reduced those conflicts by 80 percent, and you will be dealing with 20 percent. And you can deal and live with 20 percent.”

Ann Kern, Managing Director at Korn/Ferry International, put it this way:

“My priority was always my children. My children always came first. I never missed a basketball game or football game or anything. But I was consumed with being successful – I was consumed so that I could pay the tuition when my kids went to Harvard. I also worked very hard on the weekend and from home; the business would have to be done on the phone at night.”

Betty Yuen, the first woman to become Managing Director of CLP Power Hong Kong Limited, one of the leading power companies in the world, articulates her goal:

“Working is just a means for me to earn a living so that I can have a good family life. Therefore family was my ultimate motivation. I am very happy that I can do so well in my career. However, career is just one part of life. The most important part is my family. I work to live, but not live to work. Therefore I do not feel superior to others because of my achievement in my career. My role as a wife and a mother is even more important.”

It does not mean that Betty is not giving her best to her work. She cannot afford not to do so. Otherwise, she would not have risen to the top of this traditionally engineer-dominated utilities company as a female accountant:

“My husband always comments that I have two ‘personalities’ because I am active in handling problems at work while I am happy to be a follower in the family. Therefore my friends think I am an easy-going person, but it is not the case when I am at work. My husband describes me as a person who is ‘careful in important things but careless in minor things.’ I do not have too many views on minor things because I think it is just wasting my time.”

Irrespective of background, our interviewees are unequivocal about what their priorities are. Family and children always come first. Treating family as the priority has not stalled the success of our women leaders.

Chen Ying, Managing Director of Anhui Worldbest Chemical Fibre Company and a number of joint venture companies with

American and Italian partners, is one of the new generation of successful women entrepreneurs in China. She describes her priority:

“I know what I need. I am a person who can find happiness from work. But when it comes to major life decisions, I will put more emphasis on my family. There are no other principles concerning our family life. There may be a lot of tangible problems, but if you think clearly, they are not principles. There is only one principle, and that is related to my son. When it comes to my son’s affairs, I am insistent on my principle; the others are not important.”

Chen Ying started her career as a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army. When she started her own business, she came across a few opportunities which would have required her to leave Anhui, her home province, to go to work in Shanghai or overseas. However, she sensed that her husband did not want her to leave home. She decided to stay behind. She eventually built up a manufacturing enterprise in her home province, which has won her many awards and honors, including being selected as one of the 10 most outstanding women leaders in the region and the exemplary woman entrepreneur award in 2006. The carpet that her company produces has become the top brand in China.

Selecting clear goals is particularly important when facing critical situations. Rita Fan has been the President of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong since the 1997 handover when Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony and became a Special Administrative Region of China. Rita had two family crises during the tumultuous period of the political transition. In the mid-1990s, Rita was serving on the Preliminary Committee set up by the Chinese central government to prepare for Hong Kong’s handover. Her daughter was studying in Canada at that time. When she learned that her daughter was very ill in Canada, she dropped everything and flew to Canada to stay with her daughter. Even when she had to fly to Beijing for the Preliminary Committee meetings, she would leave right after the meeting, and not stay behind to meet the press. She believed it was important to provide spiritual support and physical comfort to her daughter when she was sick and recovering. She subsequently gave one of her kidneys for her daughter’s transplant. Her daughter has since recovered and returned to Hong Kong to enroll in her medical studies.

In 2003, Rita’s husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He died one year before our interview. Rita confided that she was very tired, both physically and psychologically, during her husband’s illness:

“I knew he had to go but he had a strong fighting spirit until the end. He was staying in a Beijing hospital [for treatment] toward the end of his life. In the last few weeks, I wanted to be with him as much as I could. I flew to Beijing every Thursday and came back [to Hong Kong] every Tuesday to attend LegCo [Legislative Council] meetings every Wednesday. When I was in the Beijing hospital, I just sat by his bedside. I felt that it was important that I spend the last part of his life journey with him. I am glad that I did it.”

What kept Rita going? She said:

“My family is priority number one. I must have a reasonably happy family before I can serve the public. Family has always been a safe harbor for me, especially when I face a lot of pressures outside. My family is a place to go back for comfort after the stormy sea. If my family has any problems, I would drop everything to be with my family.”

Sandra Lee, Permanent Secretary in charge of health policies in the Food and Health Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR government, went through a similar family crisis when her husband suffered a stroke in 1998. She was resolute in giving her best to both her husband and her job:

“In 1998 when my husband had a stroke, we faced it with courage. I have strong will-power and did not let him give up on rehabilitation. Even at difficult times, I still viewed myself as a blessed person. I only took 10 days’ leave from my work, as I could not find a nurse at first. Then I hired 24-hour nurses to take care of him. I still counted my blessings – at least we can afford to hire 24-hour nurses, and I did not have to take leave all the time. Every day, I went to the hospital at 6 a.m. to bathe him and returned to visit him again after work at 8 p.m.; I spent the whole day with him during weekends. I had a strong drive, that is, my husband would not accept himself as bed-ridden. So with my encouragement, he would not give up. I trained him to walk and go out for dinner. I insisted that he would come back to a normal life. I have strong will-power. Unless I am physically incapable, I will persevere and achieve.”

Sandra went on:

“I am not the sort of person who blames others. I do not ask ‘why me?’ or ‘why did my husband have a stroke?’ I analyze situations rationally and think about what I can and can’t do. I am very rational in organizing time; I set my priority and do not give up when times are difficult. I should be able to perform these two important roles (work and family). I think I am always challenging myself. I believe, psychologically, it would have made my husband feel guilty if I had taken a long leave [from work] to take care of him, as he knew how important my work was to me. My objective was to make him feel that he could have a natural recovery through the training routine used in rehabilitation for strokes, so his moods became more relaxed. I knew that if I took more leave to stay with him all day, it would create more conflict between us. At that time, I thought clearly about how I should go forward, and weighed the effects of going either way. I do not deny that I was physically exhausted, but when the goal was set, I tried my best to achieve that goal. After his stroke, I helped him regain the ability to walk, and insisted that he be mobile even though he was in a wheelchair. Whatever I did, I would give him the courage to keep trying and I would insist that he would achieve the goal to return to normal life as far as possible. For example, he would take hospital leave to go out for dinner. I think it was important for his mental health. It gave him ‘dignity’ by being mobile. Before I agreed to take the London posting in 2000 [Sandra was posted to the Hong Kong office in London], we agreed that since my husband could receive rehabilitation treatments on the National Health Medical Service in England [her husband was British], it was less demanding for the government than if I were posted to other countries. I brought two nurses and a maid with us to the UK. I would schedule my work and stay home more with my husband. Even with out-of-town assignments, for example, I would leave on an early morning flight in order to stay at home the previous night.”

Sandra’s husband died in London before she returned to take up the post of Secretary for Economic Services in Hong Kong in 2000. Despite her stoic commitment to her work even during this family crisis, Sandra is sensitive to the family needs of her subordinates:

“There is life after work; there is a family after the office. If my colleagues have any family problem, I let them take time off to take care

of their family responsibility. For example, I had an EO [executive officer] in the London office who faced a family crisis. I allowed her to work at home via e-mail so she did not have to work at the office.”

How can we determine the right goals and select our priorities? Frances Hesselbein, founding President of the Drucker Foundation, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Leader to Leader Institute, and former Chief Executive of the Girl Scouts of the USA, has been giving sound advice to leaders who are women for a long time. She recalled a question and answer session in a retreat with eight of the highest-ranking women, all of whom were presidents of subsidiaries or vice-presidents of major functions for three of the largest American corporations. The first question these women asked her was, “I have a husband and children and a wonderful job. How do I find the balance I need in my life?”

Frances found herself telling these women that they should take time to listen to the whispers of their lives: “You have to take time, whether you call it meditation, or whether you call it finding quiet moments and just thinking. We remove ourselves from all the noise. We find a quiet corner and we think. It is amazing how the answers or maybe questions will come. It is very important; otherwise we skim along the surface of life.”

Many women may complain that they do not even have time to think about themselves, yet alone find time to meditate about what is important, when work is a series of crises and family is an unending demand. Frances always finds time and uses it creatively:

“I fly twice a week, speaking somewhere in our own country. Flying so much, I find that, for me, it is a wonderful time to think because no one can get to me. There are no phones. And I always find time right before I go to sleep. I try to think, look at the day and think about what happened today and where was I helpful, where was I most productive and successful and what were the areas I could have done better.”

Frances also sounded a warning:

“Now if you don’t give a lot of thought about your life goals and priorities and plan for them, you can get whipped up into this hectic schedule where you’re frustrated because you can’t be with your family.

I think it’s tragic that we hear a successful business leader saying, ‘Oh, I’m having such fun with my grandchildren. You know, when my own children were growing up I hardly knew them. I was so busy. And now I’m having fun with my grandchildren.’ And I think that’s a very sad statement.”

### *Optimization*

Baltes and Heydens-Gahir’s (2003) second category of coping strategy is optimization. They refer to the “acquisition, refinement, and use of means to achieve the selected goals” (p. 1007). The most talked about optimization strategies in work–life balance are scheduling of time and energy and multitasking. As time constraints are the greatest concern for working women everywhere, we discussed in greater detail how our women leaders make more time in Chapter 3.

Squeezing time does not mean the women leaders sacrifice their health. Carrie Yau was the government official handling the SARS crisis in Hong Kong in 2003. She does not believe in working non-stop. During the intense crisis, she managed to balance her life:

“I was on standby 24 hours a day during the SARS period. But even at that time, I did not think I had to work without stop, like our front line colleagues [in the hospitals for example] do. I had to make important decisions, such as allocating funding. If I were too tired, I would make some wrong decisions. [During the Vietnamese boat people crisis], the police force taught me to sleep at 11 p.m. They said they would call me if any emergency arises. I also encourage my subordinates not to work overtime continuously because it just reveals the problems of the whole system or the inefficiency of individuals. Continuous overtime work also does not benefit the organization because when we need staff to handle some special situation, the staff may be burned out or sick. Therefore, I focus on keeping myself physically strong and happy in spirit. I try to avoid evening functions or sleeping late.”

### *Compensation*

Baltes and Heydens-Gahir’s third life management strategy, compensation, involves the use of alternative means when time and material resources are limited. Especially in terms of childcare, the daily tasks

cannot wait. Women who hold busy executive positions often have to rely on external aids or the help of others.

Almost all of our Hong Kong women leaders have Filipino domestic helpers who take care of their housework or childcare, though they still need to supervise them. In addition, their extended family members often live close by and are able to give a helping hand with supervision. In the United States, where live-in domestic helpers are much rarer, a few of our interviewees did get helpful assistance from part-time or full-time housekeepers. Our interviewees all expressed their gratitude to these helpers, many of whom have worked for their families for a long time and in some cases are considered part of the family.

In Mainland China, part-time or live-in domestic helpers from the rural regions have now made home help more affordable. This was not the case during the time our women leaders were starting their families. Most of the women had to rely on their own parents or extended family to help out.

Gu Xiulin, Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, is one of the highest-ranking women in the Chinese government. She is also the President of the All-China Women's Federation. In 1983, she was elected Governor of Jiangsu Province, the first female provincial governor in China. When she assumed the post, she brought her two children along to Jiangsu while her husband stayed behind to work in Beijing. It is not unusual for couples to be posted to different parts of China. Gu Xiulin explained how she managed through the support of the social system and her extended family:

“I joined the Party and became a leader in the seventies. The Party would arrange for my parents and family life. My mother was also responsible for the children's development, such as helping me bring my two children to school. In addition, social welfare provided nurseries and kindergartens to look after children. The most difficult time was when I was in Nanjing working as the Governor of Jiangsu Province, and my husband said he couldn't bear the responsibility of looking after the children in Beijing. Back then, my two children were in primary and middle school respectively. Although there was a cafeteria [at the work unit], where we ate most of our meals, life was still extremely busy. Things improved when my mother and sister came to Nanjing to help out.”

Feng Cui, a staff member in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, did not have her extended family nearby when her children were young. Her income was low at that time. Both she and her husband were still at work when their children came home from school.

“When my elder daughter was a baby, I employed a nursemaid to take care of her, and when she turned 2 I brought her to the kindergarten. My second child was left with another family to be taken care of because employing a nursemaid was too expensive. At weekends I would bring him back home, so I was only able to see him once or twice a week. This arrangement was very common back then. I remember in those days, it took a lot of effort to find a suitable family who would baby-sit children. Usually I paid out the expenses with my salary for the two children’s care, and then there was not much money left in my pocket. My husband covered all the family day-to-day expenses with his salary; all that was left each month was about 26 Yuan RMB (equivalent to US\$ 3.5, enough to buy 150 kg rice at that time). In a dual-career family where both parents are working, you can send your child for boarding at the kindergarten. This way, the child will subsequently become very mature.”

Feng Cui continued:

“I feel the biggest pressure was when my children were in nursery school because work was extremely busy then and I had to travel often. The places that I traveled to were far away, and I did not have any family in Beijing to help look after my children. So the children were trained to become very independent and they learned to always help each other. Both of my children helped with the housework and my husband prepared the ingredients for lunch so that my children could heat them up themselves when they came home. My daughter managed the family affairs, cooked, and protected her younger brother from being bullied. My children were also taught how to do the laundry, which was a big help in reducing the time we had to spend on household duties.”

Feng Cui’s husband added that, at that time, they had to tie a key around their children’s necks so that they could go home from primary school on their own. It was not uncommon in their generation for children to stay at home by themselves when their parents went to

work. Their neighbors would also keep an eye on the children. Readers from the US and many other countries will recognize this practice. The children are often referred to as “latchkey children” because they have keys so that they can let themselves into the house after school.

In China, the government’s system of job assignment often results in family members being posted to different parts of the country. Wu Qidi, Deputy Minister of Education, is a typical example. During most of her life, she has been posted far apart from her husband. She said the longest time they had physically stayed together in one place was when both of them went abroad for further studies in Switzerland from 1981 to 1986. When she became President of Tongji University in Shanghai, her husband asked to be posted there. He finally got his posting as Vice-Director of the Standing Committee of the Shanghai Economic Council, and later became Chief Secretary in the city government in Shanghai. But, at about the same time, Wu Qidi was promoted to the Ministry of Education and had to move to Beijing. They both learned to adapt to this lifelong separation, although it was not easy. The separation is particularly difficult now that her husband is suffering from cancer. Due to his unstable condition, he has to stay in Shanghai to receive treatment. Wu Qidi has to rely on her son’s family to take care of her husband during the week when she is working in Beijing:

“Personally, I value my family very much. In these days, my husband’s health condition isn’t good so I go back home almost every weekend, and make arrangements at home. Now, my parents have passed away, but I still have two children. One child moved overseas after graduation; another one is still going to school. My family is still in Shanghai. I am already a grandmother. I try my best to do many things, for example, I do my best to take care of my husband’s health. I asked my son, daughter-in-law, grandson and granddaughter to stay with him, and I live in Beijing alone.”

Wu Qidi finds this situation of being apart from her sick husband undesirable, but she has to settle for this substitute arrangement for his care for the time being. Fortunately, her husband is able to keep himself busy with, and enthusiastic about, his work in Shanghai. This gives her a bit of consolation.

There are times when the mother’s role cannot be substituted. Our women leaders have found creative ways to compensate. Cordelia Chung, Vice-President of Business Partners, IBM Asia Pacific, was posted to Japan in 1996 when her daughters were in grade school in Hong Kong. While she had domestic help and her lawyer husband was there to supervise the household, Cordelia still kept a close watch over her daughters’ school work, like many Chinese parents:

“The important thing is having peace of mind. I called home every day. My two children were studying Primary 2 and Primary 3, and I would prepare dictation with my children over the phone. They faxed their homework to me and then I corrected them. For the same work, their father gave them 85 marks, and I would give them 65 marks. At first, I asked them to make use of a recorder to prepare for the dictation, but they were too young to do that. So they wanted me to help them over the phone.”

This was before Skype and other types of voice-over-internet technology became available. With the available communication technology at the time, Cordelia managed her mother’s role.

These compensatory behaviors do not come without a cost. Our women leaders learned how to manage emotionally as well as practically. Nellie Fong, Chairman of the Chinese operation of PricewaterhouseCoopers in China, served as a Member of the Executive Council of the post-colonial Hong Kong SAR government and the China People’s Political Consultative Conference. She described how she adjusted to having a maid take care of her baby daughter:

“After my daughter was born, I employed a maid to look after her. However, my child became quite attached to the maid and felt quite distanced from me. For example, when the maid was on holiday, my daughter would cry non-stop until she returned. I was really hurt because I felt my child loved the maid more than she loved me. As a mother, this has great psychological impact. Later, when my child reached the age of 2, she could identify her mother, who held the authority at home, and who really loves and cares about her. I feel women must experience the psychological conflict when they reach this stage in life. One must be able to accept and confront this challenge. Otherwise your professional career will most certainly be affected.”

## Arranging Water Molecules

The children came first, but the work got done – sometimes later. Women in executive positions have the greatest leeway to reduce some of the time conflict because usually they can decide when and how to get their work done. People with the highest levels of work–family conflict also report being least satisfied with their job. Through a combination of careful planning and the autonomy of their positions, these women were able to reduce work–family conflict. They may be better able to handle work–family conflict than mothers on lower rungs in the organization because the many crises top executives encounter in their jobs have taught them how to handle difficult and unexpected problems, whether they occur at work or at home. Time-based conflict is a problem for all working mothers. This may be one area where high-level executive moms have an advantage, despite the excessive time demands of top-level careers.

Feng Lida, an immunologist holding the rank of General in the Chinese Navy Hospital, uses the metaphor of a water molecule to describe her view of the interface between work and family, and also between people and the larger society:

“I think harmony is vital to every person and society. Relationships between people should be harmonious. There can be no harmony if the family members are continually arguing and feeling tired. A harmonious family is like water molecules arranged in a particular way so that water can provide an uninterrupted flow. If you argue, you will alter the arrangement of the molecules. Every family is a system of perfectly arranged molecules that needs love and caring to maintain its careful arrangement. I think about the delicate arrangement of harmonious families that women maintain and, based on this vision, women can expand from the family to the society.”

When Feng Lida adopted the water molecule metaphor, she did not have the English-language work–family spillover literature in mind. However, the metaphor is a befitting close to this chapter on work–family spillover. Only when there is harmony in the work and family interface will there be an integrated system of water molecules. Conflict results in splashes of individual water droplets.