



“From stress workshop – to way of life”

Bamako, Capital of Mali in West Africa. It was a hot sticky African day and hot air seeped into the classroom and battled with the rusty aircon which seemed to want to give up its life. As the day wore on the hot air began to win the battle.

But never mind, I was on fire. For here I was doing what I love to do - with a World Bank agency dedicated to improving crop cultivation methods. I was teaching and facilitating one of my favourite subjects - how to deal with stress and bring more energy and meaning into your life. The program had begun in India and was called “Work Life Balance”, which is what the agency I was working for had asked the program to be called. And this was the title that most stress and well-being workshops went by “Work Life Balance”.

I had run three programs prior to the Mali experience, and they had gone well. But the name of the program had undergone a transition.

Let me tell you how.

During the year before the programme began I had completed my Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Certification under the tutelage of Professor David Cooperrider. I liked so many things about AI, but one of most powerful was the importance of the words that you use to describe what it is that you’re studying - as the saying goes “Words Become Worlds”.

So during the second program I ran in India I looked again at the term “Work Life Balance” and decided it was the wrong on two counts.

First – the word “balance” caused further stress. The image that comes to mind is that of a see-saw with one person on one end and somebody on the other end and they’re trying to balance the see-saw to come to equilibrium. But the underlying feeling produced was that of stress. As we attempt to balance the seesaw, and to extend the symbolism - as we began to balance our lives - the dominant word "balance" produces a physical sense of stress within the body. I know this because I asked my audience for their response to the word balance and they agreed that they felt a tension when thinking about balancing all their home and work commitments. And when I said to them “you know what - let’s change the word “balance”, what word would be better for you?”

The word they agreed upon was “integration”. And as they agreed on using "integration" there was a palpable sense of relief within the room. Sometimes work would need more time and sometimes home would win. Yes this felt better.

I asked them "does the phrase work-life integration work for you?"

Most people agreed but there were some puzzled faces shining at me from the front row. I turned to them and said what’s wrong with “work-life integration” ?

Quick as a flash one bright young woman said “I work to live: I don’t live to work”. I want my work to fit into the overall picture of what I want to do in the rest of my life. And my life comes first.”

“How would you change this phrase?” I then asked.

And quick as a flash again the reply came back “it should be “life-work integration". Your work should serve what you want to do in your life not the other way round.” This was the second issue. The whole classroom burst out clapping and cheering. You could feel the relief in the room. And so for the rest of my roll out of this program it became called “Life-Work Integration.”

That was until I got to the stifling room in Bamako.

I told the story of the evolution of the course name expecting them to be pleased with the way we had developed.

Uncertain African faces stared back at me. Clearly I needed to flow with the energy in the room and explore. I formed small groups which somehow made the hot room even hotter. They talked loudly and talked long and they talked excitedly. They give their feedback on why the changed title of the workshop sometimes could work and sometimes couldn’t work.

Then one older African man raised his hand. And as he raised his voice a hush came over the rest of the group. Here was a man clearly with some status in this community.

Quietly he said with one of those voices that resonate with the earth, “as I begin to think about the rest of my life, my yearning is for fulfilment, and I want that fulfilment to feel good and positive.” By now the room was silent as it reflected on the wisdom that had just been shared. I took my marker to the flipchart and I crossed out the words “Life-Work Integration” and replaced them with “**Positive-Life-Work-Fulfilment.**”

This is what the program became known as, all over the world. Because it didn’t just express the name of the workshop.

Positive Life-Work Fulfilment expresses an aspiration and a desire that excites and inspires people. And it also inspires me.

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