ABSTRACT

When examining work-life balance, positive experiences are not the opposite of negative ones. Instead, they are fundamentally different. The goal of this project is to explore the experiences, attitudes, and environmental characteristics of success in work-life balance. The project is rooted in the academic discipline of public administration, which is concerned at its core with the cooperative effort of complex human beings dedicated to public service and to missions directed at improving management of public programs. Higher education constitutes a quintessentially public mission, especially at public universities. The results of this study are expected to contribute to public administration literature focusing on employee success in the context of public personnel administration and public service culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project is informed by three primary streams of research found in both public administration and related social science disciplines: positive psychology, strengths based management and public administration ecology. Each of these research areas includes a focus on humans at work. Positive psychology differs from traditional psychology in its emphasis on wellness as opposed to disorders and disease. Literature in this area of psychology assumes, as we do in this study, that positive human experiences are different from, rather than the opposite of, negative experiences. Research in this area seeks to correct bias resulting from a primarily disease-oriented study of psychology.

The origins of strengths-based management in public administration stretch back at least to the work of Elton Mayo and his colleagues at the Hawthorne Western Electric Company. These studies were originally designed in the tradition of scientific management theory and, therefore, with the goal of understanding how to best remove the human element from work by considering workers as simply parts of a machine designed to accomplish a complex task. Quite unexpectedly, the studies uncovered the importance of positive human interactions and mutual support in the workplace. Modern inquiries into strength based management focuses on how to develop management techniques nurturing employee strengths rather than becoming preoccupied with areas of difficulty.

In the context of public administration, ecology does not refer exclusively to the physical environment. Instead, ecology as considered in public administration refers to the broad spectrum of interrelationships between individuals and their environment. As first delineated by John Gaus, the list of factors primarily shaping the ecology in the public sector include: people, place, physical technology, social technology, wishes and ideas, catastrophe, and personality. In studying strengths contributing to success in work-life balance, it will be important to consider how the unique ecology of academia.

ADVICE FROM MENTORS

“...The person who gave me that advice I just adore. She could tell me to walk around without pants on and I would be like, that sounds like a game plan! ...”

“...2-2-2 Rule ...never do more than two of everything...”

“...my graduate advisor said don’t get defensive, take a breath, think about the question, remember that it’s not a personal attack...just trying to get you to think about your science differently, better possibly...”

“...There is never an emergency in English. You are not a medical doctor you don’t have to answer a person in 5 seconds, they can wait until Monday when it is Friday...”

“...To be successful is to cultivate relationships with others and not just have your office or space be an island...”

“...Find what intrinsically is interesting to you and pursue that direction. Don’t do what I tell you or what I think is interesting...”

“...Be yourself, don’t let people change you ...”

“...take responsibility for your own actions...I hear it coming out of my mouth all the time, you can’t believe the number of people who want to blame someone else....”

“... don’t sweat the small stuff is probably a piece of advice I remind myself about all the time...”

“...Everybody wants to work hard but don’t work too hard...because for this job even working 24 hours a day 7 days a week 365 days a year you still have lots of work to do, you can never finish whatever you want to do...”

“...if you don’t refill your own glass, no one else will do it for you...”

“...sometimes I think it helps if you have someone who has been through the process who can say this is the disruptive part of the process but hang on it gets better...”

“...ask questions, sometimes you have to ask two or three times...”

METHODS

Data for this project was collected using semi-structured interviews. Interviewees included faculty from both STEM and non-STEM disciplines employed at Washington State University. The project conducted between 30 and 40 interviews, each of which were approximately 30-45 minutes in length. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy including elements of snowball sampling.

The data from the interview was coded using an empirical, grounded theoretical approach. A draft of the coding scheme was developed with the assistance of students in the public leadership course. The coding scheme included both quantitative variables (presumably primarily binary variables) and more qualitatively coded elements using emergent taxonomies. A catalog of especially revealing quotes is being collected throughout the coding process in order to allow for thicker description of project findings in the academic publications employing data gathered in this project. This catalog is coded using an emergent taxonomy in order to facilitate coordinated discussion and presentation of the data.

SRG

DISCIPLINARY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is little doubt that achieving and maintaining work-life balance involves substantial challenges. Arguably, significant barriers exist for women pursuing careers in traditionally male dominated fields such as the academy in general and STEM disciplines in particular. Continued work directed at articulating, specifying and understanding these challenges is of vital importance. A better understanding of barriers to full participation in meaningful careers is fundamental to improving policies and practices designed to nurture inclusive workplaces.

On the other hand, everyday people experience success in achieving a work-life balance. Furthermore, work in a variety of social sciences ranging from anthropology to sociology demonstrates that individuals with complex lives, including engagement with meaningful work, involvement with family and friends, participation in the community, and recreational activities tend to enjoy greater success and satisfaction. Creating a better understanding of factors underlying success in work-life balance is at least as important as understanding barriers.

PARTICIPANT DATA

Chart Title

Age of Participants

1 2 3 4 5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No 18-35 36-40 41-45 46-50 51-55 56-60 61-65 Over 65

STEM Non-STEM

Tenured as of Fall 2012

1 2 3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Yes No

STEM Non-STEM

Chart Title

Life Partner Employed Outside Home

1 2 3 4 5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No Yes Part Time Full Time

STEM Non-STEM

Chart Title

Life Partner

1 2 3 4 5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No Yes

STEM Non-STEM

HTTP://ADVANCE.WSU.EDU/ADVANCE AT WSU