The Relentless Pursuit of Work-Life Balance: We’re Asking the Wrong Questions

My 16-year old has experienced three significant losses in the last 18 months: the drawn-out, painful death of his grandmother to colon cancer, the death of one of his closest friends (age 14) who died unexpectedly in her sleep due to diabetic complications, and very recently, a 16-year old friend to suicide.

Teenage suicide is by far my greatest life fear. My commitment to ensuring that my kids: 1: have resilience to push through difficulty; 2: feel anchored/grounded when the sh*t hits the fan; and 3: feel secure in themselves when the world seems cruel drives every decision I make.

Not only does this commitment drive the decisions I make regarding their activities and associations; it also drives my decisions regarding my own life...how I spend my time, who I spend it with, where I direct my energy, how I carry on when I am tired and overwhelmed.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of participating in a women business owners educational event. I was a panelist with three other exceptional women. The audience question that dominated the second half of the discussion was about work-life balance, and how we manage to be good parents while building our businesses.

Every working woman with kids "struggles with the juggle" (yes I bought the domain name www.strugglewiththejuggle.com but I haven’t figured out what to do with it yet). One panelist said she catches up on emails while she is hiding in the house during hide-and-seek with her kids. I know countless women who take conference calls in closets or the garage, check emails in the bathrooms, or check emails while their kids are falling asleep in their cribs. We are all on a quest for the elusive holy grail of work-life balance (or work-life integration as I call it).

Sheryl Sandberg’s book, "Lean in" only added fuel to this constantly raging fire. Couple that with Yahoo’s Marissa Mayer’s new policies to eliminate telecommuting, and women everywhere are soul-searching for ways to advance their careers and businesses while being present parents.

When it was my turn on the panel to share my strategies on work-life balance, my answers deviated from the traditional panel answers. Perhaps it was because I am about 10 years ahead of the other panelists, and my kids are old enough (13 and 16) for me to see who they really are now, as individuals in their own right. 10 years is a lifetime in the development of a child.

I have often said that there are many times when I had to sacrifice the growth of my business for the development of my children. This has been the norm, not the
exception. Would Information Experts possibly be a $50 million firm after 18 years if I would have outsourced the bulk of the child rearing - and raising? Perhaps.

But now, as I can see and FEEL the incredible connections I have with my sons after more than a decade of hands-on parenting, I can tell you that it was worth every dollar left on that table.

One of my future (in-progress books) is about what I call "The Spaces in Between." It's about the beauty that is born during the in-between times, and how the Mundane can become Magical. This occurs within ourselves when we give ourselves downtime, in our companies when we allow our employees room, safety, and time to innovate, and also in the relationships with our children when we are present during the seemingly unimportant times.

One of my favorite pastimes with Jared was our 35-minute drives to the Orthodontist over a period of two years, when he was 13-15. It always resulted in a loss of about 4 hours of work time between the commute and appointment... but really... does it matter? That time pales in comparison to the bonding that takes place during 70 minutes of alone time. The day his braces were finally removed, he said, "You know Mom, I'm so happy to have my braces off. But I'm really going to miss our talks."

My heart breaks not only for Jared's friend that took his life - I can't process the level of sadness, isolation, and helplessness he felt to make such a tragic decision. But it breaks 1,000 times for his mother and father.

The questions to be asking ourselves as parents are not, "how can I Lean In more?" or "how can I achieve better work-life balance?" The question to be asking ourselves is, "am I doing all I can to help my children develop resilience, feel anchored, and feel secure within themselves?"

Why does the work-life balance question even start with the "work" part? How different would things be if we led with the "life" part - so that the work piece has to wrap around the life piece? A seemingly small but largely important detail.

As business owners, we are so obsessed with growth, and getting our businesses to the "next level." Well, guess what... our kids need our help in getting to the next levels - and they have a right to expect that help from their parents. They can't get there without us. The teenage years are the most complicated and difficult time of a child's life.

Tamara Erickson, a generational expert, specifically says that this is the absolute most crucial time of a child's life, and the time that requires the most presence. At a time when we may think we can go on auto-pilot ("oh... they can be home alone..."), this is actually the time to Lean In with our kids. It is the time when we are competing with so many external factors for influence.
I felt compelled to write this because frankly I am tired of the renewed pressure women feel to *Lean In* now. If women continue to desperately seek solutions to the work-life balance challenge, and are seeking ideas from those who they think have it figured out, then it means they are struggling.

So, here are my pointers:

- Stop struggling.
- Be present with your kids.
- Go easy on yourself.
- Your business will evolve the way it should.
- Embrace the times you have with your kids - both the planned times, and the *spaces in between*.
- Learn ideas from others - but don’t compare yourself to others. (I know... it’s so hard to do this).
- Stay true to what matters to you.
- The secret to “balance” doesn’t lie in some business-oriented “strategy” like time management or delegation. Your personal sense of balance manifests when you make peace with your personal choices, and when you find peace with where you are in this precise moment in time.
- And remember...believe me when I say that no one has it figured out - because there is no magic formula that applies universally.

Marissa is Founder and Chairman of Information Experts, an 18-year old multi-million dollar strategic communications and learning firm in Reston, VA. She is also the Founder and CEO of Successful Culture, a consulting firm that helps CEOs build excellent cultures, cultivate exceptional leadership skills, create growth-focused advisory boards, and reach their personal and organizational potential.

She is the author of "My Company Rocks: Eight Secrets to a Growth-Driven Culture That Keeps Employees Happy & Engaged," and the #1 best-selling, award-winning book on advisory boards “Built to SCALE: How Top Companies Create Breakthrough Growth Through Exceptional Advisory Boards.”

Marissa is a regular contributor as a small business expert on ABC’s *Washington Business Report*, is a syndicated columnist for *SmartCEO Magazine*, and is the author of an internationally known blog on organizational culture, leadership and entrepreneurship: www.successfulculture.com.

Most importantly, she is the mom of two teenage sons who are the beat of her heart, the pulse in her veins, the energy in her soul, and have taught her the greatest lessons and truest meanings of love, life, happiness, fulfillment, and success.