

STRESS

# Great Performers Make Their Personal Lives a Priority

by Stew Friedman

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Common wisdom holds that to enhance well-being and reduce conflict and stress, you've got to ease up on work. Conversely, to have a significant impact on the world and be successful by prevailing societal standards, you've got to put work above pretty much everything else in your life.

This is [zero-sum thinking](#), and it runs counter to what I have observed in three decades of teaching, practice, and research on the possibilities for achieving success in all areas of life. There are many

truly successful people in our midst who have achieved greatness not by forsaking their families, communities, and private selves, but, rather, by embracing these parts of their lives. They have found creative ways to reduce conflict and replace it with a sense of harmony between work and the rest of life. Not only does this reduce stress and its discontents, it is the very source of the strength that enables their admirable accomplishments.

In *Leading the Life You Want*, I profiled successful people who exemplify this fundamental idea. They show how to harness the passions and powers of the various parts of their lives and bring them together to achieve what I call “four-way wins” — actions that result in life being better in all four domains, perhaps not all at once, but over the course of a lifetime. These people make a deliberate choice to be conscious of what and who matters most. Their actions — at work and elsewhere — flow from their values. They strive to do what they can to make things better for the people who matter most to them, those who depend on them and on whom they depend, in all the various aspects of their lives. Having this clarity of vision helps reduce conflict, stress, and strain.

The good news is that this kind of integration is available not only to those with extraordinary talents and lots of luck, but to anyone interested in investing effort to lead a life in which you stay true to yourself, serve others, and grow as a person. This integration and a laser-like focus on what truly matters most to you is the key to leading a meaningful, less overwhelmed life — the one *you* want. When you focus on what’s meaningful, [stress and strain are reduced](#).

It starts with three principles: *be real*, *be whole*, and *be innovative*.

- **To be real** is to act with authenticity by clarifying what’s important to you. It’s your answer to this basic question: What matters most to me? What do I truly value? Is it family? A creative pursuit? Spiritual growth?
- **To be whole** is to act with integrity by recognizing how the different parts of your life affect each other. This means identifying who matters most to you at work, at home, and in the community; understanding what you need from others, and what you have to give others; and seeing whether and how these needs mesh.
- **To be innovative** is to act creatively by experimenting with how things get done in ways that are good for you and for the people around you—taking realistic steps aimed at scoring four-way wins; at work, at home, in your community, and for yourself.

Here are two examples of how these skills play out in the lives of the exemplars I studied.

Julie Foudy is a soccer champion who, in 1991, as a member of the U.S. national team, won the first Women’s World Cup and then won bronze in 1995 and gold again in 1999. She was part of the iconic U.S. soccer team that garnered Olympic gold in 1996, silver in 2000, and gold again in 2004. But Foudy is an exemplar of leading the life you want because of what she has done beyond the soccer field. Based on the gender bias she experienced firsthand as a player, she has devoted her career to leading an array of organizations that promote athletics for young people, empower young women,

and advocate for social causes. Foudy's success off the soccer field is an outgrowth of her passion for soccer, her insistence on pursuing the most fruitful expression of her talents, and her ability to fuse all the important parts of her life — her soccer teams, her family, and her advocacy for causes about which she is passionate.

Tom Tierney is the cofounder of Bridgespan, former CEO of the powerhouse global consulting firm Bain & Company, and author of the philanthropy guide *Give Smart*. Throughout his accomplished career, Tierney has sought creative ways of fitting together the domains of his life. He has built organizations that encourage personal growth by, for example, rewarding results and not face time and by motivating people with an inspiring vision of contribution to a greater good.

Early on, he understood that while he wanted to achieve financial and career success, his family came first. Based on this overarching value, and even while rising through the ranks at Bain to become its CEO, he did not work on weekends. Instead, he spent considerable time with his sons, coaching them both to the level of Eagle Scout. Eschewing work on the weekends, which was counter-normative, if not radical, required discipline and an uncompromising ability to focus on what mattered most to him. You might think he got pushback from colleagues but, in fact, the opposite was true: People respected his priorities, especially when he demonstrated to people working for him that he expected them to organize their time according to their values and needs beyond work. Tom is renowned for taking the time to reflect, writing daily in his diary and taking time to do an annual review of his own personal logs, asking himself, “Am I living according to my values?” This enables him to make conscious and deliberate choices that align with his own values, and that are good for his key stakeholders at home and at work, as well as for himself.

Of course, no one's fate is entirely in their own hands. Foudy, Tierney, and the others I profiled are mere mortals like the rest of us, who experience tragedy and loss, and who must learn to compromise. But they have been able to achieve their enormous success because they have the strength to know what's most important to them — and then to consciously and deliberately align their actions, at work and in the rest of their lives, in ways that are congruent with their core values. When you are able to do this, there is far less conflict between the domains. Your work colleagues understand what's most important to you and your family, and others who matter outside of work know this, too. Thus, they can help you to pursue and engage in what is most important to you.

From a distance, what Foudy and Tierney accomplished might seem relatively easy. “If I had as much money and support as these great business people or those great performers,” you might say, “then I too could control my destiny, choose my working hours, and devote myself to worthy and fulfilling causes.” But in each and every case my team and I studied, we saw the same pattern: leaders who worked incredibly hard and persistently to develop skills that enabled them to bring others along with them toward a vision of a somehow better world.

They made mistakes and errors in judgment, and because they were intent on improving and fully employing their natural talents, they were able to learn from them. Though they didn't start with

much, they persisted, *because* of their commitment to their families, communities, and private selves, not in spite of these other aspects of their lives.

Our research convinced me that anyone can practice these leadership skills and increase their chances of finding freedom and harmony.

Since each of us faces a unique set of challenges and has different priorities in our lives, the essential first step is to figure out what matters most to you. Once you know what's important, then you can begin to engage your stakeholders — at work and outside of work — to gain a better appreciation for what you each need and expect of each other. **With this knowledge, you can begin to experiment** with new ways of getting things done in order to reduce stress and the strain that results from conflict between work and the rest of life. This might involve exploring a new job, learning to play a musical instrument, devoting time to daily reflection about your values and purpose, sharing your vision of the future with friends and co-workers and letting them know how and why they're part of it, reliably committing time (even small amounts) to your children so they can count on it, doing a digital detox (time off screens) regularly, or bringing your friends and work associates together for an activity they'd all enjoy. Actions like these can help you to create value in each of the important parts of your life.

The key is to try, even for just a few weeks, then see what you learn from your experiment, generate ideas for new ones, and just keep on innovating.

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Stewart D. Friedman is the Practice Professor of Management at the Wharton School. The former head of Ford Motor's Leadership Development Center, he is the author of *Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life*, *Baby Bust: New Choices for Men and Women in Work and Family*, and *Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life*. For more, visit [www.totalleadership.org](http://www.totalleadership.org), find him on Twitter [@StewFriedman](https://twitter.com/StewFriedman), or on LinkedIn.

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