

Integrating Work and Life by Knowledge@Wharton

What do Michelle Obama, Bruce Springsteen and Sheryl Sandberg have in common? According to a new book by Stewart D. Friedman, founding director of the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project and a practice professor of management, each has developed the skills to integrate their life and work successfully. In *Leading the Life You Want*, Friedman profiles six people who he says embody these necessary skills - being real, being whole, and being innovative - and helps readers to begin to apply these skills and strategies in their own lives.

Recently, Jeffrey Klein, executive director of the Wharton Leadership Program, sat down with Friedman to discuss why the phrase “work-life balance” has to go, and how true harmony among the different parts of life can be achieved.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Jeff Klein: *Leading the Life You Want* builds on decades of your research in leadership and development, as well as in work-life integration. What led you to write this book?

Stewart Friedman: I published *Total Leadership*, which is the predecessor book, in 2008. It is the story of my Total Leadership course, which I have been teaching here at Wharton since 2001. I created it as head of leadership development for Ford Motor Company when I was on leave from Wharton. In *Total Leadership*, what I have done is to tell the story of that course, which generally takes about four months to [complete]. It is a step-by-step series of activities that I ask students, clients and readers around the world now — in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) I teach on Coursera — to go through ... in a progression. It is very systematic, and one step builds on the other....

Klein: That has been immensely popular here.

Friedman: [One of the things that] was missing from the *Total Leadership* book and what drove me to write *Leading the Life You Want* [was the] pushback from people who say to me, “Stew, all this work-and-life stuff sounds great, but to be truly successful in the professional or in the public world, you have to sacrifice everything in your life, right?” What I knew from my own experience, but also as a consultant, as a coach, as an educator, and as a researcher was that it is not true, even though that is the common wisdom.

I am not saying here that you can have everything all the time and that you can have success without sacrifice, without effort, without discipline, and without persistence in the

face of disappointment. But what I am saying is that not only is it possible to create a greater sense of harmony among the different parts of your life while achieving greatness, it is necessary. The people who are most successful — even by external markers of fame and wealth and power — are the folks who are able to figure out, in their own way, how to bring together the different parts of their lives over the course of their lives. Indeed, it is their commitments to family, to community, and to their private selves — their minds, bodies and spirits — that gives them the strength, the resources and the support that they need to be successful in the professional world. Reason one was to address this issue of you have to sacrifice everything: not true.

Klein: You are saying it is a false choice: It is a false choice that holds us back from the kinds of success and happiness that you are talking about.

Friedman: Indeed. To think in terms of the binary work-life balance does not work because it forces you to think in terms of tradeoffs. ["Work-life balance"] is a term that I have been railing against for decades, and we are making some progress there because more people are talking instead about work-and-life integration or harmony over the course of life.... If your mindset is what am I going to have — work or life — then you are always thinking in terms of what you have to give up.

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Klein: Yes, there is always loss.

Friedman: There is always something to lose. Of course, your employer sees that as well. If you are working for somebody, and you say I need some more balance, what she — your boss — is probably thinking is, OK, you are taking something from me, and I have already got nothing, so how is this going to work?

Klein: Yeah. Where does that go now?

Friedman: We really have to be focusing the conversation on what I refer to as four-way wins: things that you can do that are within your control that enable you to create value in some way and demonstrably improve results not just at work, not just for yourself, not just for your community, not just for your family, but for all four. What I have discovered in asking that question of students and clients around the world — tens of thousands of them now — is that everybody can answer that question with an affirmative response: Here is something I can try. That is a big part of what we are trying to get people to do with this model and with these examples.

I wrote this book to show examples of wildly successful people who have shown that you can integrate the different parts of your life and be incredibly successful, and in fact, you need to [go through that process]. The other was to really drill into the skills that these [successful people] developed naturally, and in most cases unwittingly, to break down for the reader the skills that people use ... to lead the lives that they want....

In the second half of the book, [there are] exercises that anyone can do to practice these skills in any way they want in any order they want. This is different from the Total Leadership book in the sense that you can just pick and choose whatever you want to focus on. In fact, the book starts with a self-assessment, which you can also do for free online. It takes just a few minutes [and it] shows you, of these 18 skills that I have described and illustrated, which ones do you want to focus on? Then you choose which

ones you want to develop by reading the cases about them and/or just going right to the exercises.

Klein: Let's talk a little bit about the engaging set of stories that you offer. We have Michelle Obama, Bruce Springsteen, Eric Greitens, Sheryl Sandberg, Julie Foudy, and Tom Tierney. Why and how did you decide to focus on these individuals?

Friedman: For years now, I have been asking our MBA students who take my Total Leadership class to write a leader biography: choose somebody who they want to focus on, who they just want to discover more about, and to look at their lives and their careers through the lens of the three principles of Total Leadership. In what ways are these people being real, the first principle, acting with authenticity by knowing what is important to you, your values and your vision; being whole, [the second principle], respecting the whole person, knowing that there are these different parts of your life (your work, your home, your community, your private self) and that they do affect each other; and then being innovative, the third principle, constantly learning and experimenting with new ways of getting things done? Those are the three principles, so go out, dear student, and find somebody who you want to learn more about and write up how they have done this. I have read hundreds of those biographies, which is part of what persuaded me that, yes, it is out there, and this is a way to approach what it means to lead the life you want. That was one source.

Another was just people I admire and wanted to learn more about myself. The other was clients or people who I knew about and from just asking around: Ultimately I wanted to try to create a representative sample. There are three men and three women. There are two from each business sector: sports, entertainment and the public sector. The purpose there is to illustrate that people leading the lives they want are everywhere. You may not identify with Michelle Obama or Bruce Springsteen or Sheryl Sandberg, but you can learn from them. It's not like you have to model your life after them, but let's look at what they have done and the skills that they have really mastered that has enabled them to lead the lives that they truly want that you can learn from and use yourself.

Klein: I certainly appreciate the strong message that comes from the selection of these six subjects, which is leadership work-life integration.... It is a universal question. It is a universal challenge. Perhaps it is a universal opportunity. That is not just in the realm of business or just in the realm of a certain kind of a person, and I think these stories really bring that to life.

Friedman: That was definitely part of my intention: to demonstrate that these issues are not just in the business world but [are relevant to] anyone who has a sense of ambition and needs to learn about how to bring the different parts of life together in a way that works. So many people who I run into every single day are feeling the sense of being overwhelmed and that things are out of control. This approach is helpful in giving people a model for what they can do and how to do it to gain a greater sense of control. Of course, the great paradox — and the reason I chose this title ultimately — is that “leading the life you want” happens when you discover what is uniquely you: your passions, your interests, and your skills and converting that into value for other people. The idea is — and this really only came into very sharp focus for me when I was reflecting on the book after it was done — what have I learned from this? That was the big insight: Leading the life you want happens when you take what is most core to you and make it of use to others.

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the different parts of their lives over the course of their lives.”

Klein: I appreciate that. It reminds me of the old saying — I don’t even know where it comes from — wherever you go, there you are. Wherever we find ourselves — who we are at a core level, at an authentic level — is so essential to being of service to others and ultimately of being of service to ourselves.

Friedman: But you have to know what other people around you are interested in. It starts with understanding what matters most to you, but then you have to take an outside-in view. Who are the important people in my life and in my world, and what do they really need from me? Some of the exercises are just about that issue of identifying the critical people and talking to them to clarify what they expect, what they need from you when they look at you. When they look up to you or at you, what is it that they see?

Using the knowledge that comes from these exercises, which really raise your awareness, your consciousness of who you are, who the people around you are, what they need, and then on the basis of that diagnostic work, discover new ways of creating value for them and for you. That’s what makes this about leadership and about sustainable change because it all leads to taking action that is going to make things better for you and for them.

Klein: Let’s focus on some of the stories that bring the total leadership principles — be real, be whole, be innovative — to life. I am a Bruce Springsteen fan, and the story you tell is riveting. He makes a comment within this profile that two of the best days of his life were the day he picked up the guitar and the day that he learned how to put it down. How does that illustrate the principles that we are discussing here today?

Friedman: Bruce’s story is really quite amazing. It was so much fun to write. What that particular quote represents is another really important theme of the book that I saw in all these different stories. That is this idea of evolution and conscious learning by attending on a persistent basis to the question of, “Who am I? What matters to me? Who matters to me, and how can I best live as they need to live, as well as how I need to live?” He found his voice and his identity in that guitar — and he was very, very fortunate to have that. Most people do not have that moment when they are 12 years old to discover that this is now who I am and this is who I was meant to be, but people can discover that through continual exploration. Ultimately, much later in his life, as all the six people in this book demonstrate. They changed a lot from where they started.

Another one of the myths that I am trying to bust with these stories is that you are born with this capacity to be great. Not true. It is a matter of, yes, skill. There is a lot of luck. But there is also persistence, discipline, passion and courage to pursue that which is most important to you and to the people around you. Much later in life, as other aspects of his life became even more important, like when he became a father, he realized he had to make room for other aspects of his life now. [He made] the conscious, deliberate choice to change again and to rest and to make room for other people — like the people he was creating with [his wife] Patti. That represented yet another stage in his development.

Klein: We are not static as people and the guitar — I really like the way you put it — the guitar says to him, this is who I was meant to be, but it is not all he was meant to be. He was meant to be so much more, and he creates that space. Such a compelling, right-before-bedtime story. I woke up energized the next morning....

Friedman: Bruce’s story is especially valuable in teaching the skill of creating cultures of

innovation, which basically means he is somebody who is learning all the time, and he is just pushing everybody around him to discover new capacities, new ways of living, of expressing their talents, and that is why he is such an inspirational leader of his band, of his fan base, of so many people in the world.

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Klein: Michelle Obama, our First Lady, has another really compelling story.

Friedman: And somewhat controversial. I am sure there are people watching her, thinking, “Michelle Obama leader? I do not get it.”

Klein: Well, I was convinced. I will tell you that much....

Friedman: But did you come in skeptical?

Klein: I came in probably not knowing enough. I knew there was a very public role that she plays, but not knowing the extent to which she was involved in organizations earlier in her career and then the extent to which she has been championing causes throughout her time as the First Lady. It was very instructive to me. There is a quote from her at one point — I think when she is a university administrator: If what you are doing does not bring you joy every single day, what is the point? That is the question she is asking herself, both about her professional career, but also the ways in which she is engaging with her children and with her community, which is incredibly strong. What lessons does Michelle Obama present to us?

Friedman: The three skills that I hone in on, in terms of analyzing her story, are her capacity to align her actions with her values and to really do the hard work of figuring out what matters most to me? What do I need to be doing? The quote that you chose is emblematic of that. She is asking the question on a regular basis and then taking action. The second one is managing boundaries intelligently, and her story about how she arrived at the White House and how she really thought through and negotiated what it was going to be like for her and her daughters is just a wonderful example of what is possible. Even under the white-hot scrutiny of the entire world, [she was able] to figure out, how am I going to bring the different parts of my life together in a way that works not just for me, but for my children....

Klein: Will you say a little bit more about boundaries? How should we think about boundaries?

Friedman: By “boundaries,” I mean the spaces between the different parts of our lives. There are two ways to think about boundaries. One is to create firm boundaries that are impenetrable that allow you to focus on one person or one group or one project at a time.

Klein: [Like] now I am dad. Now I am work Jeff.

Friedman: I can't do anything else, and this is the only thing I am going to do right now. I am just going to focus just in on this one person or this one thing right now. That is what we mean by creating a boundary that is firm and as impenetrable as you can make it. But then there is another way of thinking about boundaries, and that is to make them permeable. I do not have a strong view about which is better. Because sometimes you need to have those firm, impermeable boundaries, and sometimes you need to make

them more porous to allow different parts of your life to come together in ways that are mutually enriching.... I do not think there is one best way. The best way is the way that works for you and for the people that matter to you, and that means continually checking in: Is this working?

Klein: And being really conscious about boundaries, which is what that skill offers.

“These questions are top of mind for me all the time because I am trying to find solutions even though I have been at this for decades. It’s a lifelong quest.”

Friedman: Exactly. The third skill of Michelle Obama is to embrace change courageously. This is a woman who has made some really difficult decisions to try new things that put her in a zone that was anything but comfortable, in pursuit of her core values and living them in a way that she learned from her father, which is another thing that I try to bring to life in the story.

Klein: Absolutely. I am going to switch gears a little bit here. Throughout your work with Total Leadership, you have created and led countless peer coaching groups and learning communities. Right now at Wharton, we have hundreds of MBA students who are in a voluntary program that draws upon your work and other faculty members’ work to talk about passion and purpose and principles within their lives. I look around. There are Lean In circles. There are True North groups. This conversation feels really relevant in today’s world. Given that, are these exercises best experienced in a group? What advice would you have for managers and for parents about how the exercises that you describe can best be used?

Friedman: You will find that many of the exercises do explicitly instruct you to work with other people. Some of the things you can do on your own, but then many require you to engage other people in your learning and discovery, and there are two main reasons for that. Peer-to-peer learning, in my view, is [valuable and powerful]. Why it is so valuable and so powerful? One reason is that it builds in accountability. You make a public commitment, and by that I mean to another person outside of yourself, that you are going to try something and ask them to help you to stay on it. If they have a good reason to do that, that is going to put pressure on you, which is a good thing that most people need. Accountability pressure is one highly valued aspect of any kind of peer-to-peer learning.

But the other is support, encouragement, reinforcement and another perspective. That helps you to see — especially when you are both doing the work of exploring what matters most — who matters most and what I can do to change to make things better all the way around. If you are doing that as well as I am, I am learning a lot just by trying to help you and listen to your challenges and concerns in creating meaningful, sustainable change. You get accountability pressure, you get support and you get another perspective that someone else can bring to you that you cannot see. The bonus, of course, when you are helping other people to learn what it means for them to lead the lives that they want, is that you develop new insights in trying to help them, which, Jeff, is the secret reason I write these books and teach these courses and work with clients in all kinds of different settings. These questions are top of mind for me all the time because I am trying to find solutions even though I have been at this for decades. It’s a lifelong quest.

Klein: You make the argument that *Leading the Life You Want* is about consciously compassionate action and about helping others. What advice do you have for our audience and for your readers about how to find that kindness for others and especially for themselves?

Friedman: That is, again, the kind of paradoxical idea behind the title: You become more free to pursue the things that matter most to you when you take your resources, your assets, your skills and try to apply them in the service of other people. This is illustrated in virtually all six of these stories. It is such an important idea, and it has been around forever. Most of the world's religions preach this, and the reason that they do is because it works, and it is something, further, that most people need to be reminded of because ultimately we are animals as well as gods.

We have these competing tensions in terms of our motivations, but anyone can take small actions to do what they can to think about the needs of other people and use your time and energy to try to serve them. Even in the most constrained and even horrific circumstances this is possible. In fact, the Eric Greitens story illustrates this particularly well. It is a means of survival. The way people get through really trying circumstances, like in Hell Week for Navy SEAL training, or worse, in concentration camps in World War II, [is through finding meaning in our lives]. Meaning comes from creating value from other people for other people, and you can always find a way to do that.