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Women in Science Column – November 2017

Work-Life Balance: Pay It Forward!

I find it difficult to follow my fellow Women in Science community members on the topic of Work-Life Balance. There have been so many great tips and perspectives already shared this past year, but when the community asked for an industry perspective. I felt compelled to raise my hand and volunteer to write this month's column. I've grown so much in my career in industry, and there's one thing that I am reminded by one of my dear mentors early in my career. He said, "Pay it Forward." From time to time, when we are in the flow, running fast and getting a lot accomplished, one may pause to think, "did I take the time to breathe today?" It's a wonderful gift to stop, reflect, and think deeply about that single question to ask yourself, how am making all this possible? What should I keep doing, and what should I stop doing?

Much of my personal career growth in managing my time is through learning from others and learning a lot about myself, trying the things that work for me. Here is my opportunity to "Pay it Forward." I am an early career industry scientist. I am also a single mom, who went back to school when my son was 5 years old to pursue my PhD. Work life balance is a skill I am constantly cultivating to fit my and my son's needs. Many thanks to the mentors, friends, and colleagues who supported me through this journey up until now. Here is what I would like to share, for those of you curious enough to read on:

1. Love what you do – at the end of the day, why are you here? Are you pursuing your passion? Does the work you are doing really matter to you? Is this aligned with your core values? Do you know how you want to make an impact in your workplace or with the people you care about?

Another great mentor once said to me, "work life balance isn't about finding ways to make short cuts, it making the trade off and deciding for yourself why you put in the work that you do." Yes, at times you may have to put in the sheer hours, but if this is something you care about, accept it as part of your life, and make sure you balance your life with other things that also fill you up.

2. Take time off – balance is a funny thing, I think we know what it's supposed to look like, but do we really make time to walk the walk.

Are you allowing yourself to check out, turn it off, get some sleep, let the wheels in your brain slow down for a refresh, do you have something else outside of work, outside of life's responsibilities to replenish? How often do you need this in order to show up whole, centered, and the best version of yourself in the workplace and beyond? Do you value prioritizing yourself as much as putting in the hours? If not, you may find that working hours for hours' sake is like wheels spinning in place.

3. Ask for help – It takes a team. I love this part of the industry setting; we spend a lot of time building a culture around teamwork and I think it's one of my favorite parts of working in a big company.

As much as I would love to look, feel, and act like a super hero. I am not. I must rely on the support and teamwork from others. I've had great opportunities to watch leaders around me cultivate this culture of team. They surround themselves with a diversity of perspectives, they are not afraid to admit they are not the smartest person in the room, they harness the strength of the collective to achieve greater results. Working for a seed company, and in a region where food security relies on increased agricultural productivity, the pace we need to drive innovation is fast. If we are harnessing the strengths of those around us, the possibilities could be much greater with the sum of many parts. A great mentor once told me, surround yourself with your weaknesses, take the time to build a team that balances or compliments the strengths of each individual, spread the workload so work life balance can be achieved. This too can feel equally or even more rewarding depending on what makes you tick.

4. Enjoy your colleagues – about team, do you know who they are, what drives them? Do they know who you are and what drives you?

Whether you work to live or live to work, getting to know those around you and allowing them to know more about you can also help facilitate work life balance. If not for creating the most effective ways to communicate with each other, it's also creating a great sense of team. If you take the time to enjoy the people around you, it could prove helpful on the days that are really tough, knowing you have support nearby.

5. Work smarter – strive for fewer meetings.

I admit, my laptop background has a schematic "To meet or not to meet: Why are we meeting?" Everyone's time is valuable. Give yourself and your collaborators the precious gift of time. If you know each other well already, and if you're familiar with the communication style that is most effective, is a discussion really necessary? Can the information be shared with an email?

Have you done the pre-work to determine what you would want to get out of a face to face meeting, and have you prepped your attendees to help them get their thoughts around the topic before you meet? There are many ways to stay connected and share information. At Monsanto, we use Instant messaging, Slack or Yammer to share content and connect with people. Sometimes, a simple phone call can also save time.

Thank you for the forum to share some ideas about work-life balance. In a world of constant change, maintaining our resilience and energy levels should be a top priority, if we are to show up and be available to those that need our full presence: family, friends, and colleagues.

BIO

Stella started her academic career in agriculture with a passion of being part of a solution to end poverty and improve food security in developing countries. Born in the Philippines, Stella got her undergrad at Purdue University in International Agronomy, and then completed her Master's at Colorado State University in Plant Breeding. Stella joined the workforce with the USDA at North Carolina State University working in maize breeding and genetics. She then took a role at Monsanto and helped start a line development breeding program in Illinois. Stella left industry to pursue her PhD in Plant Breeding and Genetics at the University of Wisconsin, working to elucidate tissue culture ability in maize, an important step in plant biotechnology. Stella has volunteered in Sub-Saharan Africa with USAID teaching plant breeding and genomics. She recently completed the Monsanto Emerging Leaders in Science Program and is currently in Global Breeding focused on Precision Breeding for Asia and Africa.