Moderator:
Arianna Huffington, Chair, President, & Editor-in-Chief
The Huffington Post Media Group

Presenters:
Sattar Bawany, CEO, Centre for Executive Education
Shannon Brown, Dean of Faculty & Academic Programs, Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security & Resource Strategy
Dan Cockrell, Vice President, Disney's Hollywood Studios

What Does It Take To Become a Quality of Life Changemaker?

We live in a society of 24/7 connectivity, where burnout is glamorized and people brag about working all night. Corporations push employees to their limits. Yet we know better. We know that stress kills and that tired employees aren’t innovative or productive. In the singular pursuit of “success,” defined narrowly as money and influence, we have forgotten our human needs for rejuvenation. Arianna Huffington believes this will soon change.

We are on the cusp of a new, more enlightened era that prioritizes quality of life. Energized, healthy people who prioritize quality of life are vastly more productive and creative, and make better leaders. The evidence is measureable on organizations’ bottom lines. The problem is that most leaders, and most people generally, don’t realize the importance of quality of life.

Arianna Huffington describes her wake-up call alerting her to the unsustainability of her lifestyle, which might have had a heart attack by now.

Such fates are remarkably common in our society. A full 75% of healthcare costs reflect illnesses that are preventable with lifestyle changes, such as heart attacks, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Excessively stressful lifestyles are increasingly prevalent with 24/7 connectivity.

Consider:
Studies have shown that most people return from vacations more tired than they were before since they have been working doubly hard to both be present for family members and keep up with work demands. Multi-tasking is not the mark of hyper-productivity, as conventional wisdom holds; quite the opposite. Multi-tasking is stressful, and no one performs as well under stress. Organizations need to recognize that they pay a price in employee productivity and creativity when they push people to their limits.

Sleep deprivation is the stuff of boasts. Yet the deleterious effects of insufficient sleep are no secret. Scientific findings validate the ancient wisdom that sleep, meditation, and time to recharge are essential. Professional athletes would never risk competing without adequate sleep and proper nutrition. Lack of sleep is just as detrimental to mental performance as physical performance.

Leaders make their worst mistakes when they are ignoring their own well-being. When leaders are neglecting their own needs, they certainly aren’t prioritizing the quality-of-life needs of their people.

People’s resumes often bear little resemblance to their eulogies. We are not spending our days in ways aligned with the values people will remember us for. We spend our days chasing success, as defined narrowly in Western culture by money and influence. It is time for an expanded definition that includes a high quality of life.

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Arianna Huffington believes this will soon change. She argues that the societal mindset shift will be “as huge as moving from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.” Five years from now, she predicts, a CEO won’t be able to say in public that he expects his chief of staff to be available 24/7. It will be an antiquated viewpoint and a potential HR issue. Initiatives that Huffington and others are doing to drive change include:

- The Huffington Post has introduced stress-reduction and quality-of-life-promoting practices into its workplace in all global locations, etc. A “no-device meetings” policy has boosted meeting productivity and shortened their length.
- Other companies are following suit with relaxation initiatives like vacation email policies and yoga and meditation classes.
- The panelists represented a wide swath of organizations focused on improving the quality of life of people in diverse circumstances.
- Shannon Brown teaches future U.S. Army generals that “they can’t break their people.” The challenge is that the military’s strong service culture has traditionally gone hand in hand with the notion of self-sacrifice. Service is a critical component of quality of life, self-sacrifice to the point of unhappiness has no place.
- In training doctors, Susan Frampton emphasizes empathy and compassion. Caring providers bring a powerful health-promoting tool to their work. A lesser-known quote of Hippocrates: “It’s more important to know the person with the disease than it is to know the disease the person has.”
- Arianna Huffington, Chair, President, Editor-in-Chief, The Huffington Post Media Group

She wrote the book Thrive to wake up the world to the necessity of prioritizing quality of life.

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Disney is a purveyor of happiness. Its business model depends on reputation. After all, so much happiness is a business imperative. He observed that a powerful tool for leaders who wish to promote quality of life in their organizations is to model those priorities.

“Arianna Huffington, Chair, President, Editor-in-Chief, The Huffington Post Media Group

“The supreme irony is that living as we do doesn’t just make us unhappier and unhappier, and create problems for our relationships; it also makes us less productive”
Lionel Zinsou runs a French private equity firm whose investors demand metrics showing that the companies invested in are making a positive difference in the lives of people in developing countries. This is a new and important trend in private equity, and hopefully a growing one. In Africa, promoting quality of life sometimes means protecting life itself.

Ron Oswald’s organization convinces companies to provide the mechanisms by which employees can access their rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the right to join a labor union. People on minimum wage cannot access that right. Examples of corporations that have stepped up to meet the challenges of this issue include Sodexo, Unilever, and Coca-Cola. But many remain in denial, owing partly to pressure from financial markets. Erika Joergenson works to feed the ultra-poor through the UN’s World Food Programme. Two points she made are: 1) the work can’t be done without the partnership of many diverse organizations; and 2) beneficiaries themselves need to be engaged—trained to produce food, provided with guaranteed markets, and helped to lift themselves out of poverty.

Sattar Bawany coaches executives in South East Asia, where he teaches leaders to create cultures of trust within their organizations. Employees and their families always come before customers, as employees are an organization’s most important stakeholders. Good leaders require self-awareness, a trait that is sorely lacking, in his view.

Barriers to quality of life include the pressures of modern life and widening income inequality. Among the barriers to perpetuating quality of life, the panelists noted:

Perceptions of relative importance. In the military, if an expense associated with quality of life doesn’t help accomplish the mission at hand, it is not prioritized.

The broken global food system. Countries that buy cheap food on the world market destroy their own agriculture sectors, perpetuating poverty.

Growing income inequality in America. The historical link between wages and productivity in America is broken. Productivity has risen dramatically while wages have stood still. Someone benefited from the increases in productivity, but it wasn’t American workers. One reason is the decline in union membership, from 35% of private-sector workers at one time to just 6% today.

“We have first to protect life, and then to improve life... This is totally new in our industry.”
Lionel Zinsou, Chairman and CEO, PAI Partners

“The way forward is...to sit down and think about what in your company gets in the way of people’s accessing their rights.”
Ron Oswald, General Secretary, International Union of Food