



Making life work in a hectic world

September 29, 2012 by Patience Akpan-Obong (pakpan2004@yahoo.com)

If a book was a gadget, *The Power of Engagement: How to Find Balance in Work and Life* would be best described as multi-purpose. But a book, especially this one, needs more than one word to describe it even though in essence, it is a multifunctional piece of work packaged in 147 pages of everyday nuggets of wisdom and “quotable quotes.”

The Power of Engagement is both an academic book and a coffee-table read in the self-help genre. It’s a book that anyone and everyone can learn from or live by. And it is written by one of us here in Arizona’s Valley of the Sun, Mr. J. Ibeh Agbanyim, a doctorate candidate in organisational psychology at the Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, Arizona. He holds a book-signing event today in Chandler, Arizona.

As an academic book, *The Power of Engagement* covers areas typically found in intro-level psychology, religion, management, business, human communication theory, and sociology courses. It references theories and case studies in a manner that makes the book attractive to teachers and students. It is also a “self-improvement” book that draws from different traditions. Indeed the principle of engagement, as explained in the book, is rooted in the positive thinking tradition popularised by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, whose quotes open and close the book. The book is therefore spiritual without being religious, secular without being atheistic, academic without being theoretical and philosophical without being scientific.

As many self-improvement books do, *The Power of Engagement*, published by iUniverse, Bloomington, Indiana (2012), tackles an issue that is common to many people in contemporary society: in this case the work/life balance. It raises an important question: How do we meet our obligations as professionals or employees without neglecting relationships? Mr. Agbanyim provides a one-word response: engagement.

Engagement means commitment, focus and intentionality or deliberateness in action and decisions, and the author examines its importance in the workplace, relationships and social groups. He provides 12 strategies laid out in 12 chapters. The strategies include prioritization, intentional living and spirituality, soul searching and gratitude. Missing from the list however is time-management, a crucial factor in the work/life balance. It comes up for discussion in one of the chapters but not on the same hierarchy with the 12 strategies.

The author argues that a healthy work/life balance requires engagement since experiences in one setting impact our performance in another. He begins each chapter with a quote from a famous person or the Bible and uses everyday examples and scenarios to support his points. And then at the end of each chapter, he provides a summary. This approach becomes particularly useful because some of the narrative gets bogged down by details and names in the examples. Fewer examples might have been more effective especially given that the stories are quite pedestrian.

But the everyday examples are also a strong point for the book. After all, most workers have had a difficult boss and uncomfortable work environments at one point in their lives, and most people have had frictions in their relationships. The examples therefore resonate with readers' experiences in ways that affirm the choices they make or provide a guide to resolving current conflicts.

Also, the various quotes in the book may become "words to live by" for many readers. Some notable ones are: "The road to success ... is always under construction;" "The only stress-free person in life is in the mortuary;" "Life is a kingdom of choices, not chances;" "Engagement is first conceived in the laboratory of the mind;" "Information transforms a person; lack of information deforms a person."

The pleasure that I derive from reading this book is however tempered by two concerns. First, there are too many gender stereotypes for a book that proposes engagement as a key strategy to maintaining work/life balance. The author correctly acknowledges gender differences as critical. However, rather than perpetuate gender stereotypes, a book of this nature must propose radical solutions to gender-related problems. Even as some of the statements are qualified, they constitute a major flaw. There is not much to gain from statements such as: "Most men communicate with facts and results, whereas women communicate with emotions and deal with facts later;" "Most men are performance driven, whereas women are detail driven." (p. 120).

In one of the examples, the author's solution to the difficulties experienced by a woman whose job requires heavy lifting is for her to seek another job. An "engaged" solution would be for the woman to lift lighter load. For instance, rather than carry a 50-pound box once, she could split it into two and still meet her productivity goal.

In other instances, bosses are depicted as male; husbands are providers and wives are nurturers; husband comes home from a hard day's work and asks what's for dinner expecting a straight answer but wife prattles on about her day and the ingredients! The reality, as the author knows, is that both spouses may be working outside the home and sometimes the husband finishes first, picks up the children from school and starts dinner. Sometimes, the man does not have a job and the wife works two jobs to make ends meet and may not always be home to provide nurture. Sometimes there is a male in the household and sometimes there is none. Sometimes there is a female in the household and sometimes there is none. Either parent can be the sole provider, nurturer or both. That is the reality in a hectic world especially in the current US economy.

A second concern with the book is that the anecdotes and examples are too predictable and the solutions too pat. For instance, there is the story of a man who turns to pornography because he has "marital issues." He gets so addicted that he has an affair and contracts "sexually transmitted infection." While this scenario is conceivable, real life has no such smooth trajectories and consequences of bad (or good) choices are not always instantaneous. Real life is more complex. Indeed, if it wasn't, Mr. Agbanyim would not be compelled to write this book.

Notwithstanding these concerns, I highly recommend *The Power of Engagement* to anyone who needs a quick read on the subject of work/life balance. The issues are well argued and structured. The author nimbly sustains the theme of engagement throughout the book and constantly returns to it. In this way, he himself models the "power of engagement."