



the Leadership LENS

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a monthly resource providing insight, opinion & practical information on life balance, creativity & perspective

The Grapevine Challenge

I could hear the frustration in his voice. I was speaking with the general manager of a large retail store. He said his company's policy only allowed him to carry over two weeks of vacation each year. On top of this amount, he found himself consistently losing 3 or 4 days that he could have spent camping, fishing and hunting. In other words he was handing back these extra days to his employer without the time away or just compensation! I was gathering research for an upcoming program on work/life balance at his employer's annual leadership conference and wanted to get some details into what he was facing. This general manager was receiving mixed messages. There were the obvious HR vacation policies, his desire to spend quality time with his family, and the grapevine challenge.

Let's say an employee or manager has accrued 2 or 3 weeks of vacation. A lot of employees would like to take many weeks at one time, but they often don't. They fear what other employees or managers will indirectly say through the company grapevine. In some organizations, taking all of one's vacation is viewed negatively even by upper management as in, 'he is not a team player or she isn't management material for taking all of her vacation.' There is also resentment in the workplace from those who take much less vacation. On top of the grapevine challenge, technology allows more frequent access in places that used to be considered remote. The promise of technology was to enable us to work less. The exact opposite has come to pass. Americans are the most overworked society on the planet.

How can you get over this hurdle? At the end of the day, you must take personal responsibility for your work habits and willingness to take a proper vacation. It's really about mutual



respect. You need to show your employer that you respect yourself enough to take the vacation days you rightfully earned. Otherwise, you will make an unhealthy contribution to your employer's bottom line. Why join the estimated 51 Million Americans who are vacation deprived in the Annual Expedia.com Vacation Deprivation Survey. According to the survey, each American adult who is employed will give back an estimated 438 million vacation days in 2007! This is a free gift back to your employer and results in higher turnover, less productivity and reduced creativity.

Taking a consistent vacation starts with developing positive habits while at work. How many times do you check e-mail or voice mail per day? Studies have shown that the most productive employees schedule set times during the workday to engage in these activities. They make an appointment to check e-mail. And if you have the 'ping' sound turned on when you receive a new e-mail, you are no better off than a pigeon that gets a food pellet in a classical condition study. Without thoughtful planning, you serve the technology you claim to master.

When you are the master of technology while you are working, you will find it much easier to disconnect after work, on weekends and even on your vacation. Approximately 38% of managers work in some form while they ought to be on vacation, but I believe

this figure is probably higher. It takes consistently in thought and action to build the discipline to know when to use technology in the best way possible. On vacation, don't fall into the mistaken belief you are missing something at the office. With careful planning, you can empower others to handle anything that happens while you are away. A Deloitte survey found 91 percent of all employed adults agreed that workers are more likely to behave ethically at work when they have a good work-life balance. Another reason employers need to insist that their employees take all of their vacations.

Why is the USA still the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't have a vacation law on the books? It just doesn't make sense that a 42-year old new employee gets the same two-week vacation as an employee right out of college or trade school. Vacations renew and recharge, allow you to spend quality family time without daily interruptions, they provide the space for creativity to emerge and they allow for increased awareness and perspective. Remember it all begins with your desire to stand up for the vacation you have earned. This will enable you to succeed in the grapevine challenge.

Some Vacation Do's

- Take all of your vacation time this year instead of carrying over to next year.
- Arrange to take at least one two-week vacation to further change your perspective.
- Travel to where you cannot be reached by technology and don't bring your technology with you.
- Decline to answer e-mail or check in with the office while away.
- Schedule meaningful activities with your family allowing you to be present in the moment.
- Make your vacation as important as anything else at your office and never cancel a vacation.

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