

Sun, Sea And Spreadsheets: How Should Leaders Really Use Their Vacation Breaks?

Summer is here and you're about to embark on a well-deserved break. Whether you're heading to the city, the seaside, or the mountains, or simply enjoying time at home, you're bound to be looking forward to time away from the office. So, as a leader, how should you make the most of your summer vacation?

1. Lead by example

Too often leaders will work on their break, not taking time out to recharge – despite advising their own teams to relax while they're away. “The very idea of needing to take spreadsheets on vacation speaks to a pattern of work that is out of balance,” says Becky Hall, executive coach and author of *The Art of Enough*.

“What is behind the reluctance to stop – really stop – and recharge?” queries Hall. “For many of us, there is an addiction to being ‘always on’ and always available, which can be a hard pattern to break. But we all know, deep down, that this is a myth and an unhealthy one at that. Moreover, it sends out a message to our teams that they can’t be trusted to get on with things without us.”

Hall emphasizes the importance of setting clear boundaries, learning to listen to our bodies and remembering that all of us need time for rest and recuperation. She says: “Our energy and productivity will always be better served by proper time dedicated to ‘sun, sea and stop!’”

2. Tear up the plan

“As leaders, we often have a tendency to plan, to naturally try to make the most of the time we have,” observes Nicholas Janni, author of *Leader as Healer: A new paradigm for 21st-century leadership*, which was named Business Book of the Year 2023 at the U.K. Business Book Awards.

Janni cites a recent coaching session he had with a CEO ahead of his vacation. “He was telling me how much he was looking forward to spending time with his wife and young children and how he had already planned various visits and activities for almost every day of his break. He asked my advice for getting the best out of his trip. ”So, what was Janni’s advice? “To tear up the plans. Of course, it is nice to know what activities are available, but by being spontaneous each day as a family, listening and connecting to each other, they would all get much more out of the break.”

Following his vacation, the CEO revealed how much he had enjoyed his trip, spending time chatting, laughing and playing games with his family. He focused on ‘being’ rather than feeling pressure to ‘get things done’. As a result, it was the best vacation his family had ever had.

“The lessons for leaders in this are to be present in each moment,” Janni says. “Relate and listen to the people around you, trust in unplanned flow, stop trying to control everything and find your way back to simple reverence. Your life and your leadership will be immeasurably better for it.”

3. Embrace shared experiences

Leaders often find themselves “holding the fort” while their teams take their long-awaited summer breaks. But this time of year can also be an opportunity for them to reconnect – both with themselves and with others.

To begin with, leaders must recognize the power of presence, according to Mimi Nicklin, chief executive of global ad agency Freedom, host of the MimiYouYou podcast, and author of *Softening the Edge*. “In a world filled with endless schedules, carving out intentional moments of undivided attention can work wonders,” she explains. “Take a breath, put away the phone and truly be present for those around you. By immersing yourself in the present moment, you create a new opportunity for genuine connections to thrive. You also improve your ability to understand, and empathize with, those who surround you.”

Nicklin believes that leaders should use the quieter summer months to build shared experiences with others – at home, in their community and at work. She says: “Using the time to rediscover common ground and shared passions, whether it's through community activities, shared meals, or simply leisure time, can pay great dividends emotionally for the rest of the year.”

4. Embark on a strategic reset

A summer break is the perfect time to reflect, take stock and embark on a strategic reset, says David Fish, a business strategist and author of *What it Takes to Create Winning Presentations*. “It gives you the opportunity to really take control of what happens next because simply asking your team to ‘believe’ is not quite enough to deliver results.”

Fish thinks of teams like a collection of iron filings on a table. “Over time, these filings spread apart and start heading off in different directions,” he explains. “The purpose of a strategic reset is to create a magnet that pulls everyone back together again, fully aligned and all pointing in the same direction.”

He suggests that the following five sets of questions can help to inform the new strategic plan:

- How far have you come? Are you where you want to be right now?
- What have you learned? Have things gone according to plan? If so, how did that happen – and how can you build on that moving forward? If not, why not? And what needs to change?
- What is the one thing that could change everything?
- What is the decision you haven't made? Why not?
- What do you need to stop doing to take 2023 from being good to great?

