

Executive Challenge #11:

“I Get No ‘Real’ Holiday Time Because I’m Always In Contact With the Office.”

In this article, I want to address the issue of executives and their planned holidays that simply turn into “working somewhere other than the office.”

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you?

- You choose your hotel or resort because it has a wireless connection that will allow you to check e-mails on a regular basis.
- The plane lands at your holiday destination and, immediately upon turning on your cell phone, you see 14 missed calls from various members of your team.
- You miss breakfast because you’re busy putting out fires via e-mail at the start of your day.
- Your spouse becomes upset because you’re taking calls while you’re on the beach, at dinner, at the museum – you name it.
- You have to leave your family and return to your hotel room for a Skype conference with your boss.
- You find yourself more stressed after your holiday than you were before you left because you spent your time away trying to juggle work and leisure.

These are common scenarios in these days of inexpensive and easy connections via e-mail, mobile phone, and video conferencing. But, this often means your holiday becomes more of a temporary office set up in a faraway location rather than real time off.

The Vacation Solution

The first step to solving this problem is to sit back and think about what it is that is really holding you back from completely disconnecting with the office while you’re away. Is it that you don’t trust your team to do a good job? Is it that you secretly don’t *want* them to survive – let alone thrive – while you are gone so that you can prove you’re irreplaceable? These are tough questions to ask yourself, but taking the time to think about your answers is critical and will have a big impact on whether you end up taking a holiday that truly serve its intended purpose: to recharge your batteries and remind you that you are far more than just what you do for a living.

Take some time to examine your thoughts around being gone from the office. Remember: Smart leaders know that when their company, division, or department runs smoothly during their absence, it’s a sign of excellent management on their part. If things go well while you’re on holiday, it doesn’t make you unimportant. It simply means that your team is well enough trained and able to handle situations so that you can afford to be gone for a few weeks. If you want to, you can still hold off making the most important decisions for when you return.

For a lot of executives, being interrupted repeatedly on holidays is simply a result of not having laid out clear enough boundaries up front so that they can be left alone to enjoy their breaks in peace. Here are some tips:

1. **Notify people.** Tell everyone many weeks in advance what the dates of your holiday will be, and let them know that your intention is to truly “divorce” yourself from the business for that period of time.
2. **Enlist others’ help.** Get everyone involved in helping you to have some real downtime. Ask them for help to prepare for a true break. That way, they become part of the solution, not the problem. (Bring back some gifts to the office as a way to say ‘thank you’ for their help!)

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3. **Anticipate.** Think about what activities and projects will take place while you're away, then prepare your team and everyone else who needs to know about them. Ask them to proactively think about any questions or issues that they will need to address during that time so that you can handle them *before* you leave.
4. **Set clear expectations up front.** One week before you depart for your holiday, send a notice to all people who regularly send you e-mails, SMS messages, or who call you on your cell. In this note, set clear boundaries and guidelines about how you will manage communications while you are gone. For example, you might say:
 - You will only check e-mails once every three or four days – whatever frequency you choose. You may decide that you won't check e-mails at all. If so, great! Make that clear, and let everyone know.
 - Ask people to refrain from sending you "nice to know" e-mails. If they absolutely must, ask them to put "Nice to Know" in the subject line so that you can ignore these e-mails until you return to the office.
 - You will *only* accept phone calls regarding urgent matters such as: (a) a strategic issues that have long-term business ramifications, or (b) something that could dramatically impact the business like potentially losing a big client account, or (c) an emergency that impacts safety (a fire or an injured employee, etc.).
5. **Don't just manage down – manage up as well.** Alert your boss or your Board of Directors that you will be leaving matters to your team in your absence. You need to set boundaries with *everyone* in order to claim your well-deserved downtime.

If you have taken the time to train your team well, trust them. It may take some work the first time you go away using these new guidelines but, after sticking to regular guidelines, you should be able to take holidays with greater ease.

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In one of her recently released books, *Would YOU Want to Work for YOU™? How to build an executive leadership brand that inspires loyalty and drives employee performance*, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.

After earning her MBA from Harvard, Brenda spent the bulk of her career as an executive in Fortune 100 multinationals, building brands across dozens of countries spanning four continents. Now, as President of her own company, Brand Development Associates International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, corporate and personal brand development. Visit www.BrendaBence.com.

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