

WHAT I LEARNED ON MY SUMMER VACATION

It's not too early to think about what you'll do on your summer vacation and how the office will survive without you.

BY MICHELLE LABROSSE

IT'S FEBRUARY, a time of year when many of us are already daydreaming about our summer vacation—that is, if we even take vacations at all. As busy as we all are, it's easy to get caught up in work and think that we can't take a vacation. There's too much going on at work. What will my team do while I'm gone? How will this place run without me? The answer to that last question is especially important: If you're a good project manager, your team should be able to run well without you. If they need you there 24/7, then you're doing something wrong.

This was a lesson I experienced a few years ago on my summer vacation when my daughter, our two dogs, and a cat drove together from Connecticut to Florida.

I knew about the trip a few months beforehand, so I spent a month getting ready for it. I delegated responsibilities to key people on my team and set up processes so we could easily keep track of projects. I made sure that my team members created Project Agreements before I got on the road so they had a clear road map for what they needed to accomplish and what the roles and responsibilities of each team member were. Other tools we used were the Wiki so team members could post documents and progress reports, and my blog as a key interactive communication conduit. I posted about where I was and what I was doing, and also about project management. Team members could comment and could also be part of the journey if they wanted to be—a kind of virtual post-card community.

During my sojourn, I also learned some important things about my team. I could clearly see those who could operate independently and accomplish tasks and goals with little oversight, and also those who needed more management. This gave me a lot of insight as a manager and let me know how I could manage my team even more effectively, who needed more coaching from me, and who had the capacity to take on more responsibility.

Consider the productivity aspects of vacation: According to a survey from Expedia, 33% of employed adults in the United States usually don't use all their vacation time, with the average worker surveyed giving back an average of four days to their employer. This translates to 574 million vacation days per year, worth \$75.72 billion.

What that number doesn't capture is the lost productivity from fatigue. We all know that feeling when you haven't had time off in a long time and you are both physically and mentally tired. Your per-

formance suffers, and even worse, I think your passion dwindles.

Passion is rejuvenated from the time that we spend away from our routine. For some people, it is the sound of the ocean that relaxes and soothes. For others, it's a hike in the mountains or in the desert. Vacation is the time when you can find your own "zone," that place where ideas, inspiration, and "Aha!'s" come from.

There's a reason that Thoreau's *Walden* stands the test of time. In it, he captures our relationship with nature and the importance of reflection, and poetically and philosophically explains to us the purpose of getting away from it all:

"Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been."

If Thoreau were here today, he'd tell you that the only way to grow ideas, people, relationships, or businesses is to take a vacation and find your own private reverie.

As summer approaches (faster than you think), think about your vacation. How can you prepare for it so you can relax and come back to your office rejuvenated and ready to contribute new ideas?

Here's a vacation prep list to help you get the most out of your vacation:

- Review the status of all projects two weeks prior to leaving and delegate responsibility while you are away.
- Create project agreements for any new projects that will be in progress while you are away, and make sure your team is clear on what they should be accomplishing while you are gone.
- Set up clear communication boundaries for your vacation. Can you be reached on your cell phone? If so, is it for emergencies only? Will you be checking your e-mail at all or only at a certain times? Do you only want to be contacted about certain issues? Define these boundaries before you leave so you get some downtime and so your team knows when it is appropriate to contact you.
- Bring your favorite guilty pleasure that has nothing to do with work. Whether it's *Mad* magazine or a romance novel, indulge the part of your brain that may not get to stretch at work.
- Laugh. No matter where your vacation takes you, laugh as much and as hard as you can. Take that laughter yoga class that you've read about or just laugh at life. It reduces stress, lowers your blood pressure, lifts depression, and even boosts your immune system. Laughter is more than funny, it's healthy! Enjoy your vacation.

MSC



Michelle LaBrosse, PMP (Project Management Professional), is the founder of Cheetah Learning, a project management training services company. Visit www.cheetahlearning.com to learn more.

Have an opinion you'd like to share in "Topping Out"? Send your feedback to Keith Grubb, managing editor for MSC, at grubb@modernsteel.com.