



Set These 5 Boundaries Before You Go on Vacation

By Marlo Lyons

A client of mine, “Steve,” hadn’t taken a true vacation in over 10 years. Sure, he had traveled with his family. But as a senior operations executive, he always felt he had to remain connected because inevitably something would come up while he was laying on a lounge chair somewhere far from the office. So, he checked his emails every morning and evening, took calls as necessary, and worked his “vacation” around work — that is, until he burned out. “I came back to the same treadmill without recharging. My energy level just kept dropping with each missed vacation, and then I hit rock bottom.” He noticed he could barely get out of bed, was dreading Monday mornings, and had no patience with his kids. “I didn’t like who I was or how I was with my family or at work.”

Disconnecting from work while on vacation sounds a lot easier than it actually is. Some companies’ cultures may expect you to stay connected, respond to emails, or attend meetings to keep the business moving forward. Yet research and commentary dating back to the 1910s shows that taking vacations — as in, completely disconnecting from work — is critical to lowering burnout, increasing energy and engagement, and improving overall health and well-being, which in turn will lead to more consistent productivity.

So, how do you detach from work during your vacation to achieve all these benefits? Here are five tips to set firm boundaries in a professional way.

Provide a plan

Once your vacation is approved, be clear with your manager that you'll be unavailable during your time off. You do not have to share where you're going or what you're doing, but spend time explaining how the time off will benefit the business upon your return. For example, will the energy you gain from being disconnected allow you to clear your head so that you'll be better able to focus on that big upcoming project?

This conversation should also include a plan for your manager or colleagues to cover your absence. Prepare this plan in a document, especially if you're taking a long vacation. Who is the emergency contact for which issues? Who will make sure all deliverables will be completed? Ask your manager if they need anything outside of what you prepared. The more you collaborate with them to prepare for vacation, the less stressed they'll be about coverage — and the more likely you'll be to enjoy your time off uninterrupted.

Calendar your time off

You may have submitted your vacation in your company tracking system, but your manager isn't going to remember when your vacation is weeks or months later. And your cross-functional partners won't know you're out of the office until your autoresponder kicks back to them when they try to reach you. So, as soon as your vacation is approved, send an "all-day" invitation to your manager, team members, and cross-functional stakeholders that says, "[Your name] OoO – unavailable." This will allow them to prepare for you being unreachable and communicate any needs prior to your departure.

Send pre-notice for standing meetings

Don't just decline standing meetings the week of your vacation. Send emails to let the people who run those meetings know you won't be there and ask if they need anything from you before you depart. This shows you're responsible to your partners and gives you an opportunity to inform them that you won't be available or present. If the meeting is over Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or another communication platform, ask the leader to record the meeting for you if you'll need the information when you

return. If the meeting is in person, ask the leader to send you notes and highlight any areas you'll need to address when you're back.

Maximize your out-of-office notification

Most people can't leave their job and not have someone else pick up their work or respond to emergencies. It's critical to be clear in your out-of-office autoresponder who will be available in your absence. Make sure the wording is firm but professional. If you're soft on your message, like saying you'll be "slow to respond," your colleagues will expect you to respond. The out-of-office notification should state that you'll have no access to email and will not be reachable until you return on [X] date.

Align with your manager regarding who should be contacted for an emergency and who will handle other important but non-urgent inquiries. Include contact information for each person who will be responding to any inquiries on your behalf while you're away. And if you use a communication channel like Slack, Zoom chat, or Microsoft Teams Chat, provide the same information in your status there as well.

Send a final reminder

The week before your vacation, send an email to your manager, team members, and cross-functional stakeholders letting them know when you'll be on vacation and the date you'll return. Remind them that you'll be unavailable and not be responding to emails or calls. If necessary, point out where they can find information they may need and who will be responsive during your absence. This type of reminder demonstrates your proactive professionalism and understanding that the business continues while you're gone. It will also help reduce any unaddressed issues you'll need to deal with when you return.

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Colleagues will respect you for setting clear boundaries when you're on vacation and for being proactive beforehand to ensure they're set up for success. Most importantly, once you set the boundaries, make sure you uphold them! Don't read texts or emails, because once you open the work door, it's nearly impossible to shut it again.

As for Steve, he implemented these tips and took off a week last month to spend with his kids — and didn't answer one email or call or attend one meeting. Completely disconnecting made a huge difference in his energy and engagement not only at work, but in his home life as well. "I came back refreshed, like I was ready to tackle anything — even the honey-do list at home. And more importantly, my kids told me they enjoyed their time with me more because I was able to have real fun." He jokes that he's officially a reformed workaholic because the benefits are too great to ignore. On his to-do list now? Planning a summer vacation where he can completely disconnect again.

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