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Briefing Notes:
**Short-term Absences as Learning Opportunities:
Put That Vacation to Work for You!**

With a little advanced thinking you can significantly increase the learning from your absences both for yourself and your organization. Paradoxically, your absence can often help others take in your leadership more than your presence.

The fundamental idea is to frame in advance how the organizational void of a leader's absence might get filled, use the vacuum to launch some trial experiences and learn from what happens.

There are three key modes of learning from an imaginative use of the temporary absence of a key organizational leader: anticipation, experimentation and reflection. Each offers different rewards at different stages—before, during and after an absence.

Anticipation

Notice your effectiveness when you are motivated to get away.

Often a leader or manager is crisper about setting priorities, handling things efficiently and ignoring unimportant tasks when the overriding priority is getting organized to leave. Think about why you have difficulty being as single minded and effective when you are *not* trying to get out of town.

Learn from your worries. Out of anxiety, we rarely harvest what thoughts and feelings an absence stirs up in both leader and followers or team members. Some questions for leaders preparing for a vacation include:

- What are the areas/issues/relationships that you feel are in “good enough” hands as you prepare to leave?
- What are areas/issues/relationships you are most concerned about in terms of how they will be handled in your absence? Why?

When a leader feels that the gap between his or her ability to handle issues and people and the ability of the next best person is relatively narrow, a departure occurs with some sense of security. If the gap feels large, it is time to do something about your worries. The gut can be a valuable indicator.

Be systematic about delegating. Who have you authorized to cover what specific issues, meetings or relationships in your absence, and how explicit is this authorization? How well have you communicated these assignments to the wider team? Effective authorizing involves both the individual and letting others know. How much explicit discussion have you had with your delegates to listen to *their* concerns and to give them guidance? What can you learn from comparing how you authorize people when you are going to be away versus when you are present?

Experimentation

An explained absence of a leader is a “normal” problem that you can use to test abnormal moves—an ideal excuse to experiment with new ways of doing things.

Delegate to test the boundaries of your own position. If you explicitly designate certain people to handle various issues and make them “fully” responsible. Upon your return you can assess how things have gone and perhaps not take back some of the work that, out of habit, has continued to consume more of your time than makes sense.

Delegating the tending of a relationship with another colleague for whom you have considered yourself the indispensable actor might turn out to lighten the burden of some of your fence-mending and back-guarding chores.

Delegate to sharpen your supervisory relationships. Identifying areas in which you ask for “completed staff work” rather than stuff just waiting for your return means that your team or individuals on it should have everything ready—e.g., correspondence, proposed actions—for your quick review when you come back. Checking these action items before they go out are rich occasions for specific coaching.

Delegate to test leadership skills. Putting someone in charge of some portion of your portfolio of responsibilities, if not all of it, offers an opportunity to test the drive of an emerging leader. Reflecting on who to consider (and who not to and why not) is an opportunity to imagine your subordinates in your role and assess their capabilities to fill your shoes. This process might lead you to invest in some additional coaching around an issue that may have come up in your mental scan of who could step into your role.

Reflection

Take your own temperature while you are away. Being away from work can be a time for you to do unconscious work on troubling issues or get perspective on how you are taking up your role. What aspects of one's worklife come into awareness while away? Why? Which aspects do not? Why? Think about your conversations with others while you are away: do they indicate elements of your work about which you are particularly passionate?

Use being away to learn about your value to the organization. Invite your direct reports to notice during your absence when they most experienced anxiety in moving forward on some initiative without your involvement and why. When executives are highly involved, subordinates often stop thinking imaginatively about what the boss would do. This leads to their generalized sense of a need to run things by the boss without sharpening their thinking about when the "run by" really makes a significant difference to the quality of the actions taken. Using your absence as an opportunity to have people come off "automatic pilot" might lead to some good conversations about when they can act and where your decisions offer the greatest added value.

Use being away to gain insight into your "indispensability." We often imagine ourselves to be more critical to the successful functioning of an organization than is really the case. How productive was your team during your absence? We know of one leader who went well beyond debriefing people on this question. He told his associates to imagine that he was still away for another week so he could observe and reflect on which assignments he should reassume and which he could permanently delegate in ways that would be better both for him and for others.

Use being away to learn more about and help your associates. If the worries you had before leaving lead you to question whether you have differentiated your supervision of people in appropriate ways, think about how this translates into a supervisory action agenda.

Someone who takes an acting leadership position has the double learning of experiencing that role from the inside, as well as looking at his or her normal role from the outside—fertile ground indeed for (a potentially mutual) coaching experience with the returned leader.

Use being away to learn more about the group dynamics of your subordinates. Assessing the temporary leadership experience of someone to whom you delegated part or all of your authority can reveal much about how well your colleagues work or do not work as a team. Talking with people on your return can surface valuable information about how people respond to different leadership strategies (including your own) and how they respond to others in their peer group. If the workgroup is sufficiently comfortable with open discussion, a team meeting that reflects on the time period of acting leadership can be highly productive.

Use being away to learn more about your boss or your board. Did anything significant come up while you were away? What aspects of the upward relationship can you alone handle versus what is delegable? Have you followed up to solicit feedback from your boss about your team if they have had some working contact during your absence?

Most organizations use the assignment of new areas of responsibility as a major way to develop executive talent. The genius of using vacation or other short-term absence as a developmental opportunity is that, with a little thinking in advance—and not much more time than it takes to pick a resort or fine restaurant as part of your vacation planning—it can become a valuable learning experiment both for you, your colleagues and subordinates.

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