

Time off and the value of recharging



**RICK
BRIMEYER**

Brimeyer
LLC

He is president of
the Ames, Iowa,
consulting firm

A hot topic in the business news recently is the trend of companies offering employees “unlimited vacation.” Did you flinch the first time you heard that? (I did.)

But as Albert Einstein stated, “If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.” This doesn’t mean that every crazy idea should be pursued, but rather that significant, positive change starts with ideas that are initially outside of our existing paradigms.

Won’t people take advantage of the situation? In a “Love & Profit,” former Meredith Chief Executive Officer James Autry defines bad policies as “those written to keep everyone from doing what only a few people are going to do ... and they’re going to do it anyway.”

In other words, those “special” people will provide you with multiple reasons to fire them.

For most of us, when and how much time off we take is dictated more by workload and perhaps personal situations outside of our control (e.g., illness) than by the number of hours we’ve accrued. Tax accountants know a spring break trip is not in the cards for them regardless of how many vacation hours they have in the bank.

In fact, opponents rightfully suggest the “unlimited vacation” policy can be manipulative if the culture is one of overloading employees with work and making folks feel guilty for taking time off. They point to data from multiple organizations that implemented the flexible policy and had employees take less time off.

Thus, for a win-win situation to exist, the organization must truly value, preach and (most importantly) demonstrate the value of recharging. This includes leaders modeling time off.

The benefits for organizations can be significant, both in measurable and intangible areas:

- Savings associated with not buying back unused time off from employees who already were paid full wages while working at less-than-peak levels because their batteries were drained.

- Savings associated with not tracking and categorizing time off (sick, bereavement, jury duty, vaca-

tion, etc.) to the fractional hour.

- Increased innovation and vigor resulting from physically and emotionally rested employees.

Perhaps even more important than how much time is taken off is how that time off is used. Many times I’ve shaken my head in sadness while observing some poor soul lost in a laptop at the beach or the pool. Increased capability of smartphones increases the subtlety, as well as the frequency, of this condition. That’s not time off, but rather exotic telecommuting.

Several years ago while on vacation I dove into my email on a Thursday afternoon in hopes of managing the backlog I would return to the following Monday. From that moment on, I transitioned out of time off mode to work mode. “Never again!” I swore.

As a sole proprietor now, I confess that I’ve modified that a bit. Prior to leaving, I let existing clients know that I will be gone but available via cellphone in case of a true emergency. They respect that; in eight years I recall a single call (and it was a true emergency). I quickly check my email inbox daily simply to determine if a new client is “entering the shop for the first time.” If so, I send them a short note explaining the situation and that I will get back to them.

Time off offers everyone — managers and employees — unique opportunities to see the big picture. It’s why strategic planning sessions are best held off-site.

There’s something about sitting

on a deck at sunset and enjoying a unique landscape that’s conducive to clear thinking, to exploring high level strategic questions, such as these:

- Are the most important relationships in my life growing stronger or weaker?
- How is my work/life balance scale tilted?
- Is the vision for my company (department) valid?
- Are the strategies for reaching that vision working?

Make sure that you and your employees are truly taking time away from work to recharge. The organization will survive the week (even two) and will be much stronger long term.

RICK SAYS

Time off offers everyone — managers and employees — unique opportunities to see the big picture. It’s why strategic planning sessions are best held off-site.