

Take a Vacation

by Paul Eldrenkamp

We contractors take too few vacations, and when we take them, they're often too short and too stress inducing. We put in 15-hour days the week before leaving, desperately trying to get ready. And on our first morning back at work, there's a pile of messages obscuring not only the desk but the chair as well. Who needs it?

Planning Ahead

To prepare for a longer, more relaxing vacation, you need to have a short-range, a mid-range, and a long-range plan. I'll take them in that order.

Short range. First, make minimal appointments for the week preceding your vacation. Book no meetings with prospective clients, or with current clients whose jobs have not started yet. You can hold regular weekly job-site meetings and staff meetings, but if they occur on the day before your vacation, cancel or reschedule them. Keep your schedule as light as possible the week before you leave and totally empty the day before.

Likewise, keep your schedule as empty as possible the week after you return. Don't plan any meetings for your first day back, and for the rest of the week, just like before you left, schedule only regular job-site and staff meetings — no meetings regarding prospective jobs. A few days before you leave, change the message on your answering machine to say something like: "This is Carl Carpenter of ABC Remodeling. I can't take your call, but leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Please note that I will be on vacation from Friday, June 1, through Monday, June 18, and may not be able to return your call personally until Tuesday the 19th or later. However, while I am away, my assistant, Harry Helper, will retrieve mes-

sages from this machine and return calls as needed." In fact, Carl will be on vacation from Saturday June 2, through Sunday, June 17 — not the 1st through the 18th. But this way, he can be in the office the Friday before leaving and the Monday after returning and ignore the ringing phone — after all, he's on vacation. Make sure cell phone and pager greetings are also changed accordingly.

Mid-Range Strategy

Two to three months before leaving, as soon as you've determined when you're going to be on vacation, start letting your clients know. At the next weekly job-site meeting, tell the client. During the next preconstruction conference for new job startups, tell the client. If you don't have weekly meetings or preconstruction conferences, at the very least, give every active client a phone call — don't let your absence be an unpleasant surprise. Three months before is not too early to tell them. A line item on our preconstruction conference agenda prompts us to talk about upcoming absences.

Commit to paper. It's also extremely important to get essential project information out of your head and down on paper for all the jobs that will be running while you're gone. Drawings, specifications, correspondence, meeting notes, and change orders, as well as special-order information, should all be in a job book. This is a good habit to develop for many reasons, but particularly critical if you're going to be away for an extended period.

As you interview prospective clients in the two to three months before a vacation, let them know, too, that you'll be gone for a couple of weeks, and that they should not expect any progress on their designs, proposals, or estimates for that period. Be cautious

about what you promise for turn-around time on such tasks. For instance, tell them that your vacation will be adding at least a month to the time it will take to complete a proposal because you won't be working on it during your vacation, or during the week before vacation. The week after, your focus will have to be on jobs currently in production. It's better to be up front about it than to earn their ire with a lack of progress. This strategy applies to a wide variety of construction activities: If you warn clients about a problem or a delay beforehand, you look professional; if you don't, you look like a schmuck.

There's another benefit of telling all these people that you're going to be on vacation: You have more incentive to actually *go* on the vacation. I've known business owners to feel too much pressure right before a planned trip, and to bag it altogether. However, with the strategy I'm outlining, you'd look like a dolt if you chickened out at the last minute. This is a good thing.

Long-Term Strategy

Your long-term strategy before a vacation should be, simply and obviously put, to learn and implement effective delegation and staff development. The most difficult challenge for a small-business owner is to create a company in which he or she is not indispensable. Few of us achieve that completely — I know I haven't. But we can become dispensable for longer and longer periods, and that is perhaps a more realistic goal. A well-trained crew, working with good systems, can easily free up the owner for a relaxing and refreshing two- to three-week annual vacation — a just reward for a year of hard work. And these vacations should be viewed as rewards for the owner's family, too, for all they've

had to put up with during the year. Taking a vacation is an excellent way to test your systems, training, and delegation skills; and planning an extended vacation forces you to develop systems and staff in a way that settling for short vacations never does. And so the process builds on itself: The more vacations you take, the more you *can* take.

Every construction company owner who hasn't taken a vacation in the past couple of years should include in his or her business plan or personal goals list a three-week vacation during the next 24 months and, thereafter, make vacation time an annual objective.

After all, what's the point of founding and building a company if you're not ultimately going to be the master of your own time?



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