

# Get your head out-of-office: Why leaders need to *leave* by example

 By [Anja van Beek](#)

9 Dec 2021

In such a technology world, not all of us have mastered the skill (yes, I said skill) to switch off from work. Most of us will take a few days to really relax and ironically, this is generally the time most will go back to work. For some, it is especially difficult to switch off if your colleagues or manager, in other areas of the world, continue to work while you are on your holiday.

Working longer hours or never feeling like you're away from work can be harmful to your mental and physical health, so the always-working, no-time-off paradigm is a problem.

Some progressive countries have identified this as a red flag and have implemented leave legislation that provides guidelines to allow employees to take a proper break. For instance, in Portugal, the law states

“ Companies should avoid contacting workers outside office hours, except under exceptional circumstances. ”

Their neighbouring country, France, has similar legislation in place:

“ a right to disconnect from all devices, and the implementation of rules to regulate the use of digital devices to ensure observance of rest time and leave and personal and family life. ”

We need more of this.



Image: Supplied

Research has found that long working hours led to 745,000 deaths from stroke and ischemic heart disease in 2016, a 29% increase since 2000, according to the estimates by the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation published in *Environment International*.

The study concludes that working 55 or more hours per week is associated with an estimated 35% higher risk of a stroke and a 17% higher risk of dying from ischemic heart disease, compared to working 35-40 hours a week.

What makes matters worse, the recent travel bans and also the massive fuel hike in South Africa, will have an impact on people that have planned an away holiday, with the likelihood of potentially cancelling it – which will also have a mental impact on people not taking their planned leave anymore as they cannot afford it.



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We know the saying that leaders need to walk the talk. So, how is this applicable to taking leave? Here are three tips to “leave” by example:

## 1. Corporate athletes understand the importance of recovery

Many of us yearn for a change of scenery, and studies show that holidays are beneficial for a variety of reasons. Rest and time away improve resilience, allowing people to cope better with the unavoidable setbacks at work.

It provides a perspective that can help people see new solutions to problems, and it gives people a chance to pursue other life goals, like spending time with loved ones.

You'll get the most out of a holiday if you're not exhausted (or burnt out) when it starts. When people are in desperate need of a vacation to recover, it usually takes a few days for them to clear their heads and get into vacation mode.

If you don't *need* it right now, you may be more present right away and fully appreciate the benefits of time off.

Your ability to perform in high-pressure situations is greatly influenced by how you care for your body.

High performing individuals, aka corporate athletes, understand that there should be a balance between stress (energy expenditure) and recovery (energy renewal). They are aware that being in survival mode most of the time is a red flag for any individual. Think of an athlete which has a rest and recovery time during the off-season. High performers or corporate athletes need a proper break to replenish their energy.

But, an annual break isn't sufficient. Prioritise your day by dividing it into regular shorter breaks. Steer away from back-to-back meetings and create rituals for the teams to do a mindful check-ins.

## 2. Close off the year as a team. Reflect retrospectively

As a team, create a ritual of closing off the year in a deliberate way. Most people can relate with outstanding or incomplete items taking up space in your mind – especially as your planned leave is nearing. An easy way to ensure we all can have a “worry-free” holiday and not ruminate about work, is to do a retrospective.

Have a team conversation about what worked well, take time to celebrate it, also talk about what needs to change and

what outstanding items do the team need to be aware of, or consider prioritizing these items.

Ensure that you address the elephants in the room; discuss unresolved issues. Have the courage to prioritise the challenging conversations about team members not taking accountability or respecting one another. Instead of being silent about these issues have honest and respectful conversations to ensure your team members properly switch off from work.

### 3. Become mindfully present

A valuable lesson that I've learnt over the years, especially as an ambitious working mom with younger kids, was to be mindfully present. So often our minds wander in different directions (thinking about the next presentation or the exco meeting earlier the day) – whereas, instead, you should be focusing on your kids and be present in the moment.

A practical exercise is to monitor how many hours you spend ruminating about work. Keep a record of this and you may be surprised how much time and energy you are wasting.

Secondly, define your own “psychological leave ritual” - similar to changing clothes and putting on your slacks after a workday. Do the same before going on leave.

**Here are a few other tips to consider:**

- Write your list of to-do-items for your first work-week back, schedule your meetings in advance (preferably not your first workday!);
- Be proactive: Before your holiday, discuss and agree on a plan with your manager to ensure there's cover for your work tasks in your absence;
- Do craft a helpful “Out of Office” reply saying who can be contacted in case of emergency;
- If you are part of a team, agree upfront that, should there be a crisis, to not use e-mail communication but rather a WhatsApp or a phone call.
  
- Some people even prefer to delete all work-related apps from their phones.

### Last thought

The holiday is a good time to naturally enhance the neurotransmitters in your brain. They affect your mood, memory, sleep, libido and appetite. Naturally increase these neurotransmitters by spending time in nature, exercising daily and enjoying healthy foods. Do a gratitude jar with your loved ones, reflect, list and share things you are grateful for.

If you find yourself agreeing with these pointers and still struggling to switch off, I encourage you **to simply permit yourself to take a well-deserved break without interruptions**. This will help you to return to work well-rested and energised to tackle 2022 head-on.

### ABOUT ANJA VAN BEEK

Anja van Beek is an independent leadership consultant, talent strategist and coach.  
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