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AGRIBUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Previous issues of this publication have been devoted to the improvement of an agribusiness manager's work performance. This issue differs in that it rests on the supposition that at least once a year all managers abandon their administrative domain for the explicit purpose of avoiding work. The sign on their desk will read:

ON VACATION

Dateline: Columbus. Ohio. It is, the third day of August. These words are being written in a dormitory room on the campus of The Ohio State University. I am attending a four-day meeting of agricultural cooperatives. At its conclusion, I will fly to Columbia, Missouri for a series of professional meetings; then on to Knoxville, Tennessee, and Champaign, Illinois for yet other meetings. Finally, before returning to the Northwest, I must squeeze in two working visits to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and a courtesy stop in Denver.

In view of my occupation, you might not find the travel itinerary described above to be especially surprising. But it is a little unusual. Why? Because the entire period of travel is a classical example of how NOT to spend a vacation. I had become the unsuspecting victim of poor vacation management. I originally intended to travel to the Midwest for three weeks of complete rest and relaxation.

As the departure day approached, I succumbed to a typical manager's dilemma -- a personal desire to do too many things in too

short a time period. Soon my vacation plans were crowded with a combination of business and pleasure. As I was flying to the first meeting in Ohio, it became painfully obvious that the conduct of business was to predominate and the pleasure of a well-managed vacation was never to be realized.

Vacation Management?

As a result of the unpleasantness associated with my vacation, it occurred to me that others might have suffered through a similar experience. After discussing my thoughts with colleagues and agribusiness managers with whom I met during my travels, I concluded that those most adept at managing their business are often least able to manage their vacations. Why do students and practitioners of management discard all their occupational talents when their vacation approaches? I am convinced that, like all other human endeavors, even vacations must be well-managed in order to be successful.

This issue is written in pursuit of this conviction and will differ from previous issues. First, it will be considerably shorter -- thus giving me more time to enjoy the last remnants of my would-be vacation. Second, having personally suffered through a poorly managed vacation, my comments represent painfully acquired beliefs. Finally, this issue is only indirectly related to the improvement of agribusiness management, i.e., having had a successful vacation, the manager should perform more proficiently upon his return to work.

My objective is to present a list of suggestions for improved vacation management. Of course, each manager has a different view of what a successful vacation would be composed of. Hence my suggestions appear as general guidelines and hopefully, adapt themselves readily to the diversity of personal interests. These guidelines are:

Keep it Simple. In describing my vacation, above, a major error is glaringly obvious. My vacation plans were much too complex. My travel itinerary, alone, was so perplexing that it almost exceeded the capabilities of our local travel agency. The result of this complexity was a dismal series of missed flights, incorrect motel reservations, and 3 a.m. breakfasts. My remembrances of the three weeks revolve around a perpetual fear that I would arrive late for a scheduled meeting or that my luggage would fly on to Toledo while I deplaned at Indianapolis (or where ever).

The occupational activities of an agribusiness manager involve many complexities. When planning your vacation, therefore, the first guideline should be, “keep it simple.” Simplicity is the basic element of all successfully managed vacations.

Take Time to Unwind. Despite my rigorous travel schedule, I did find two days during my three-week vacation period to spend at a Missouri lakefront cottage. Unfortunately, the two days represented insufficient time to completely unwind from my normal occupational pressures. Just about the time I began to lapse into a disassociation with the real world, the visit to the lake concluded and I was abruptly propelled into high gear once again.

Successful vacation management requires that the vacationer allow himself enough time to unwind and reach a point of complete relaxation. One’s ability to achieve this state

of metamorphosis will vary, of course, but count on no less than two weeks -- preferably three or four.

Move Out. A third important guideline for successful vacation management is that agribusiness managers should “move out.” By this I mean the vacationer should physically remove himself from the business he operates. Too often the vacationing manager is hesitant to leave the general proximity of his business as a precaution against emergencies arising. He leaves a telephone number with his secretary but fails to stipulate the conditions under which he might be contacted. Soon he finds himself accepting numerous telephone calls, answering requests for advice and making routine business decisions during his vacation period.

To really “move out,” the vacationer should intentionally locate himself where access to his business is most difficult. I don’t suggest that you go to the North Pole, cut down telephone lines, or blow up an access bridge, but think up some novel way to make it difficult for you to reach your business and your business to reach you.

Have Faith in Others. Related to the above guidelines is a manager’s reluctance to leave his business, even for a short time, in the hands of his subordinates. Fearful that the business may falter while he is away, this manager runs a daily check on activity at the office and stresses to his subordinate that no decisions are to be made without his first being consulted. Each minute of this manager’s vacation is filled with an uneasy anxiety over the status of things at the office.

A successful vacation will never materialize unless the manager has enough confidence in his associates to know, without question, that all matters will be handled as well as if he

were working. Vacation management requires the establishment of basic operational procedures and contingency plans for the business. Once these have been derived and tested, the manager will be better able to depart the premises with a clear conscience and complete faith in the talents and abilities of those who serve under him.

Avoid Excesses and Absences. My mismanaged vacation was characterized by an unending sequence of excesses or absences. There was a notable oversupply of business lunches, travel, lengthy speeches, suitcases, crowded meeting rooms, and cocktail hours. At the same time, I was cognizant of deficiencies in the areas of good food, sleep, fresh air, recreation, entertainment, and time spent with my family.

Many managers mismanage their vacations by engaging in over-strenuous activities. For fifty weeks of the year, a manager's only form of exercise may be lifting the receiver on the telephone. Suddenly during his first week of his vacation, he re-kindles his childhood interests in boating, skiing, swimming, hiking, and horseback riding -- determined to participate in all such activities before returning to the more placid position behind a desk. This common form of vacation excess creates blisters, pulled muscles, stiff necks and, in the more tragic cases, illness and coronaries. The most common form of absence is probably an insufficient amount of rest and sleep sandwiched in between a couple of hard days of cross-country driving. This, too, may end in a vacation tragedy.

In brief, the fifth vacation management guideline suggests the avoidance of excesses or absences in all forms.

Try a Change of Pace. Along with some degree of rest and relaxation, one of the basic reasons vacations are recommended is that it

provides for an obvious change of routine. My vacation travel schedule and the nature of my involvement in various meetings were such that my daily routine had not changed much from my normal Extension activities in the Northwest. With little or no change, the fact that I was actually on vacation was almost totally forgotten.

The sixth guideline suggests that vacation management should include a prescription for a distinct change of pace. The vacationer should engage in any activity except those with which he would routinely be associated. If the manager is accustomed to awakening at 6 a.m., he should be encouraged to sleep until 9 a.m. while on vacation. If he is an ardent golfer, he should try fishing. He may wish to eat differently while vacationing, trying those dishes which he has always been curious about. The change of pace concept will transform a routine endeavor into a novel adventure. There will be new discoveries, fresh interests and exhortations never before experienced. The motto is, "if it is different, then it is good," assuming the other guidelines are not violated.

De-emphasize Results. How many persons do you know who measure the success or failure of their vacation by the number of miles driven, the number of fish caught, the number of states visited, or the lowest golf score attained? Managers of agribusiness firms are often judged by results, i.e., number of boxes sold, dollar sales volume, persons employed, volume of product produced, etc. Managers, therefore, are particularly inclined to carry this search for results away from the office and apply similar judgments to their vacation performance. Concern over the numerical results of your vacation will bias your perspective, distract from doing those things which you find really enjoyable, and create ulcers. If fishing is poor, concern yourself with the beautiful scenery and fresh

air which accompanies it. If your golf score is worsening, think more of the exercise and enjoyment provided by the game.

De-emphasize all results, particularly those with established numerical standards, and concentrate on doing those things which are not designed to build an impressive set of statistics.

Avoid the Crowd. The final guideline suggests that vacations should be managed so the participants avoid crowds whenever possible. It should be noted that this is a guideline which is becoming increasingly difficult to follow. Even the more inaccessible areas of our national parks and recreation areas are becoming overcrowded. If it does become impossible to avoid the crowds, choose those places where so-called “planned activities” do not exist and where the atmosphere does not require that you be the best dressed man in the campground. Informality and spontaneity will tend to reduce the adverse affects of overcrowding. So long as people are allowed some freedom of choice and action, the spirit of happiness and cooperation will endure.

Summary

“Every now and then, go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer, since to remain constantly at work will cause you to lose your power of judgment ... Go some distance away, because then the work appears smaller, and more of it can be taken in at a glance, and a lack of harmony is more readily seen.”

These are not my words, but those of a man much wiser than I. Take note that the author of this advice for vacationing managers knew whereof he spoke, for he was one of the most productive and creative men this world has ever known.

You might consider that nowhere in the quotation does the author suggest that a vacation must be a complex logistical exercise, nor does he state that it is necessary for one to return from a vacation in a state of total exhaustion, having driven many thousands of miles, played five hundred holes of golf, and slept only a total of ten hours. Neither does he recommend that a vacation comprise a brief couple of days in a comatose state on the back porch worrying about the state of affairs at the office. According to this wise man’s words, the manager who gets the most out of a vacation is he who finds relaxation without the compulsion to pursue it. His pleasure lies not in escaping from his work, but in being able to contemplate it from a distance.

At least this would be my interpretation of the words of Leonardo da Vinci written some 500 years ago.



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