



My View

A CLEAN BREAK

Recently, my wife Deanna and I spent 10 days in Italy. It was a great trip on many levels, but the aspect I would like to address here is the "clean break" aspect. This was the first vacation I've had in a very long time where I didn't have a cell phone or access to the internet and email. Except for a couple of people who could reach me in case of a family emergency, I was totally out of touch.

This experience of being totally "unplugged" was an unusual experience for me. Like most of us, I'm always connected by email, the internet and a cell phone. For those of us who lead 24/7/365 day TIP Programs an integral part of our job is to be available and accessible. But this trip reinforced for me what many of us have talked about before....we need to find ways to take clean breaks from our jobs. By clean breaks I mean breaks where we are totally unavailable to others and when we make no attempt to stay connected to our work.

We don't need to leave the country to totally unplug from TIP. I believe that we need to take clean breaks regularly in the normal course of our lives. To take a clean break requires two important elements: 1. Turning off all communications equipment and letting others know "I will be unavailable for the next ___hours/days." 2. Engaging in a "competing interest." A competing interest is something which is not work related and which totally engages your mind and energy. When one is engaged in a competing interest one completely forgets about work. In Italy just figuring out how to get around was a "competing interest." For example, I couldn't think about TIP when I was trying to find my way around the massive Roma Termini (train station).

In addition to the stress management value of taking clean breaks, there are at least two ways that taking clean breaks makes us better leaders. First, it keeps us humble. Humility is an essential quality of a leader. When we regularly and completely step away from TIP we realize that things go on quite nicely without us. And we remember that there is much more to life than our work. When we allow ourselves to completely engage in activities outside of TIP with people who couldn't care less about TIP, we come away with ourselves and our jobs in proper perspective. I certainly came away from Europe feeling small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

The second way taking clean breaks makes us better leaders is by emptying our minds of old thoughts and perspectives and allowing new thoughts and ideas to emerge. I'm sure we've all had the experience of walking away from a task or project frustrated only to return with "new eyes" and a fresh perspective. Since my return from my "clean break" I've had all kinds of new ideas about my job and TIP. Not all of them will survive "reality" but some will.

I believe that we as leaders, especially TIP leaders, can easily fall into the trap of believing that to be good leaders we must always be vigilant and "on the job." There is even a danger of believing that being available 24/7 is something to be proud of.

Do effective leaders need to be available to the "troops?" Absolutely. Do we need to be ALWAYS available? No. And if we try to be we will lose our perspective and gradually (yes, it's a gradual invisible process) become full of self importance and stuck in our ways. In other words, we will become poor leaders. We owe it to our volunteers and to the organization to be leaders who escape on a regular basis to recharge and gain perspective.

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