

Is There Life at the



BY SANDER A. FLAUM

Top?

Or Just Work?

IT'S GOOD BEING A LEADER: The pay, bonus, and options are great; the press is heady; the perks are generous. Some leaders get season tickets for the home team—maybe that luxury box at the U.S. Open every Labor Day—and, for the highest and mightiest, a seat on the corporate jet. Social interactions change, too—the welcoming smiles from subordinates, the respect of other leaders, the right seat at the board table, and the best executive assistant.

Even the job itself feels more rewarding. You focus on the Big Issues, the pithy stuff. Is the organization positioned well in its market space? Where is the company headed? And will you and your team be ready when it gets there? No one bugs you with spell-checks, purchase requests, or event planning. The boss's time is too important. After a number of years on the job, that same deference might trickle down to the members of your family. Then, you're rarely bothered with seemingly unimportant calls from friends or acquaintances, folks who just want to hear your voice or arrange to spend some time with you. If these relatively minor unscheduled stops in your day are not on your to-do list, they ain't gonna happen.

These people don't stop caring about you or wanting you in their lives; they just eventually stop trying to push their way into your Outlook calendar. If you want to keep them in your day-to-day life, it's going to require your personal effort.

The flip side of fame, glory, loads of perks, and extravagant vacations is that they often come at the expense of the very people with whom you want to share them. Many CEOs over time find themselves estranged from their spouses and children. Mental-health professionals say that divorce rates among hard-charging executives have reached an all-time high and that many marriages still intact require a lot of compromises: tacit deals that require the nonexecutive spouse to either turn the other cheek or cope with a certain level of unhappiness. In many cases, the power brokers feel as if they've just outgrown their spouse, but the lucky and determined ones find common ground and stay together—though it requires a great deal of hard work and, in many cases, marital counseling.

SANDER A. FLAUM is CEO of healthcare-marketing firm Flaum Partners and professor and founder of the Leadership Forum at Fordham's Graduate School of Business. Reprinted with permission from *Big Shoes: How Successful Leaders Grow Into New Roles* (LeaderShape). ©2009

Family stress can present itself in any number of situations, but for chief executives there may be no more nerve-wracking crisis than the family vacation. Let's take a look at yours. While you're still going on family trips to the Caribbean and Mexico rather than Disney World (albeit not as often), you're not having quite as much fun and you're not giving in quite as much to the luxury of "beach brains." How could you?

When you wake up in the morning, your first love is your BlackBerry, not your spouse. You're technically on vacation, but you're still being summoned for the "can't wait" conference calls with customers and analysts, whose concerns can be soothed only by assurances delivered in your voice. You might also be asked to mollify the firefights that only your personal touch can hose down. Remember your kids and playing catch with them on the beach? Recall that grand romantic dinner, just the two of you? How about any of the sites in—what was it again?—Antigua or Los Cabos? No? Ah, well. You just couldn't put down that cell phone and dine in style, or drop that PDA in your sandal and jump into the water with the kids. Your spouse knows you care.

Your kids will understand, you say. They won't. A piece of research I read years ago suggested that the majority of sons of successful fathers tend to go opposite ways. The custom used to be that we wanted to fill our father's shoes or surpass his progress. This study found that the offspring of successful dads are rarely as economically successful. They'll never have the job Dad has, the house he's got, the cars, the perks. Why? They are adamant that they don't want to work as hard as they saw their parent work to get there. Their opposition comes down to a simple mantra, "I want more time for myself and my family, so I'll take a different route." I watched this trend manifest itself in my own family life and, to some extent, in the family lives of my colleagues.

Of course, there always will be a few children who join the family business or Mom and Pop's company, but most will not.

WHEN IT'S BAD TO BE THE KING

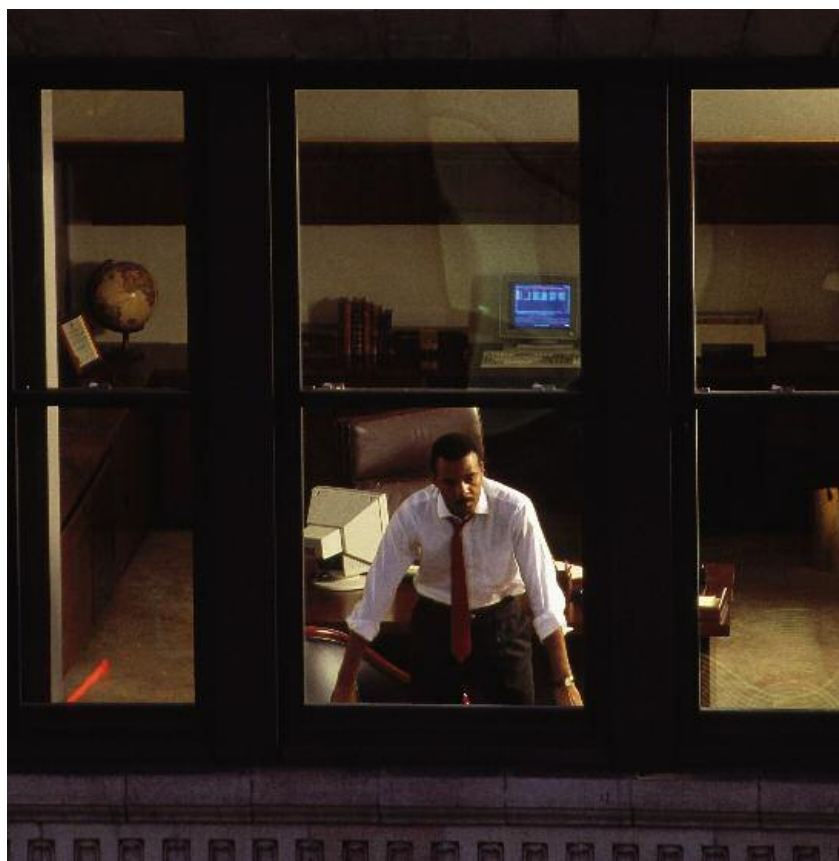
When I meet my Fordham Leadership class for the first session of the semester, my first question to them is, "How many of you want to end up as leaders?" The usual response? "Duh. We all do, Professor. That's sort of why we're here." After the term is over, and the students have delved into the history of some well-known CEOs and heard about the hardships of getting to the top and staying there, we vote again. The result I consistently get shows a change of heart: Only about half are still convinced enough to raise their hands. As a reader, perhaps now a bit frustrated, you might find yourself asking whether

or not there are any leaders who kept their competitive edge, who made it successfully through the challenges of their time and industry, and who managed to put their family first, all while putting in the time to get to the top and stay there. You would be right to wonder if such people exist, but let me assure you, they do.

Our research has shown these superleaders fit a particular profile. They are younger. They understand the agony of sleepless nights and 24/7 weeks. They realize their performance can slip when they are family-deprived and relatively friendless. They're quick to sense when their spouses are reaching the boiling point or when their kids need to come first. (No one can fully focus on the next meeting knowing there's a sick child at school or a fuming spouse waiting for an overdue call.)

These skills do not come naturally to everyone, and they are often honed over years on the job. In Jack Welch's book *Winning*, he writes: "There's lip service about work life balance, and then there's reality. . . . Your boss's top priority is competitiveness. Of course he wants you to be happy, but only inasmuch as it helps the company win. In fact, if he is doing his job right, he is making your job so exciting that your personal life becomes a less compelling draw."

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Years ago, I set aside an evening to go to a Boys High reunion with my best friend from high school. We were looking forward to catching up. After the reunion dinner ended and we had said farewell to other acquaintances, he proposed that we go out to a local bar and have a drink. I blew off the invitation because I had a 7 a.m. shuttle to Boston the next day. Sorry, partner.

We got together for a casual dinner a few months later. He lives in Westchester, and we met in New York City because of my “busy, busy, busy” schedule. We had a great dinner, and when we were finished, I looked at my watch and told him I had to go. Yet another early meeting with a client the next day. To my dismay, I haven’t seen him since. He wouldn’t take my calls.

About a year ago, I did catch him on the phone and was promptly informed that he felt my work and schedule were more important to me than spending time with an old friend. He was right, and regrettably, I haven’t had the opportunity to tell him so and try to make good. My loss.

Even the most well-meaning chiefs are known to screw up, to make choices that hurt the people we love. The new “sorry” text message from leaders: “WH2” (“We’re human, too”). The loss of a good friend taught me quite a bit about the tenuous balancing act of success. My pace and paranoia about running the smartest consulting and advertising company in health care hasn’t let up one iota. Instead, my defense strategy has evolved, and it now encompasses a broader band of executing managers—a cadre of A players and rising stars who get it and who, for most part, want attain that leader’s mantle. Not everyone fits into the big shoes, but all of us benefit from trying.

A question that concerns me is whether our culture is pushing our best and brightest toward the “quality of life” side too quickly. Are we instilling too much emphasis on “life” rather than on “work”? There is no work–life balance in India, China, or Japan. Their rising stars strive to become as prosperous as their counterparts in the West, and so there’s no letup over there. We’re being overtaken by the innovations and business muscle of these and other competitive cultures every day.

As of 2009, for the first time, Toyota is the world’s top automobile maker. Will the economic downturn rally our innovators to help restore American ingenuity, or will it hurt us even more? If we ever stop passively watching Bloomberg and CNBC every day and start actively building breakthrough products and services that we can export around the world, wouldn’t we accelerate out of our economic down turn mess a lot sooner?

Kind of puts the whole work–life balance quandary into a questionable perspective, though I doubt my buddy from Boys High would agree.

LEARNING TO PICK YOUR BATTLES

A few years ago, I had a personal wake-up call that altered my perspective on the wisdom of taking on every challenge that came my way. It’s one of those life’s lessons that bears repeating. I have always been a fierce competitor. When I was younger,

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business was like an obstacle course to me. I couldn't wait to climb over the next wall, hop through the tires, jump over the water. All I saw was the finish line. If I couldn't scale the wall, I'd plow through it. It was all about getting there, no matter what stood in my way. It's how I moved from corporate product manager to CEO of one of the world's largest global health-care advertising networks.

Years later, after trading up a few shoe sizes, I found myself walking into one of the most beautiful office lobbies in Manhattan for a board-of-directors interview. Before I reached the elevators, an impeccably tailored security guard politely noted my laptop and indicated his need to inspect it. He handled it with a gentleness I have yet to see in a New York airport. In the marble-floored elevator, I watched the numbers quickly shoot up to twenty-three. Stepping off the elevator, I was greeted by my host and led into an oak-paneled boardroom. A lunch catered by the Four Seasons was on the table, and my host poured me an iced tea. This was old school—no women, no people of color, no one under 50, just an old-time board of directors with a sense of its own importance and a taste for the finer things.

The view from the windows was spectacular, the best in the city. The room, the setting, the finery—they all said one thing: This was clearly the most prestigious board I had ever been invited to join. It was the clubby sort you imagine exists but aren't quite sure is real. A white cloth napkin was spread across my lap and a drink placed in my hand, as my host began making small talk. The CEO of this NYSE-listed company was a colleague from years past who wanted me on the board, as did several other directors. This was no interview; it was a lunch among colleagues of equal stature and power—or so I thought.

Just as I was beginning to relax, the search-committee head began grilling me about the weight and nature of my potential contributions. He was a personality I recognized from one of television's talking-head news shows. He loved to hear himself speak between commercials, and it seemed he had a script in front of him then. His celebrity status sufficiently intimidated the other directors, who sat by as he worked up to a rant. I had a couple of choices. My usual response would have been to engage in combat with such an individual, to put him in his place with my knowledge of the drug industry, confident of my record and performance. I would treat him as a water hazard or a wall and go around him or over him. Contemplating what I would say when he finally shut his mouth, a new thought occurred to me, one I had never considered before: I could just leave.

After you've been in management for thirty-five years, your intuition tells you which people are open to new ideas and which just like to hear themselves talk, which like to grow their egos instead of their companies. You also become attuned to a company's culture—particularly, whether innovation is welcome or not. I took a look around, felt the weight of the crystal Waterford glass in my hand, then set it down on the slate coaster on the antique mahogany table. I felt myself rise from

my chair. I couldn't believe what I was doing. Where was the old fighter? The Vince Lombardi acolyte trained to win at all costs?

I stood, buttoned my jacket, and smiled as I addressed the group: "Being on a board is a lot of work. I believe in this company and what the CEO is doing, and I want it to thrive. That's why I'm here. Having said that, please understand my time is valuable to me, and I've been around too long to spend it with certain people I don't enjoy. I'm not enjoying this now, and I doubt I would in the future." And then I did something I had never done before: I turned and walked out. My good friend, the CEO, intercepted me at the elevator and pleaded with me to reconsider. I patted him on the back and left.

Through the lobby, I sailed out onto a midtown street, buzzing with life. I spotted a cigar shop and soon emerged to light up before the MetLife Building amidst the energy surrounding me. After all those years on the obstacle course, I may finally have learned the hardest lesson of all. Leaders play to win, of course, but there are times when it doesn't pay to play. To extend the Lombardi winning-isn't-everything metaphor, winning the Super Bowl is arguably more important than winning a Week Seventeen matchup against the underdog, particularly when you've locked up the division, home-field advantage, and a first-round bye.

While I was puffing on my cigar, still trying to process what I had just done, a teenaged skateboard jock in urban street clothes approached me. "Got the time, chief?" he asked. Smiling at his question and back at him, I looked at my watch. "Only for important things," I said.

UNTYING YOUR LACES

Vacation, I finally learned, is a meaningful thing. As former CEO and then chairman of French-owned EuroRSCG Becker, I spent a lot of time in Paris, one of the world's most beloved spots in which to take time off. I was making regular trips to meet with my company's officials. It was a wild travel schedule, but I eventually settled into a rhythm. With my laptop and PowerPoint presentations in tow, I was whisked from my office in lower Manhattan to JFK International Airport onto an Air France flight (a EuroRSCG client) to Paris, replete with my fair share of Ambien sleep capsules (product of a prospective client) in my shirt pocket. A driver, in a smart black suit, was always there at Charles de Gaulle Airport to meet me. Off we drove to Cedex, outside of Paris, where Havas, my parent company's headquarters, was located. Once there, my folks joined the team in the conference room, set up our equipment, had a great croissant and coffee, and gave our two-hour recap of the previous quarter and our outlook for the next one. Meetings continued throughout the day with the CEO, CFO, and other agency heads, followed by dinner and our overnight stay at an awful Marriott nearby.

The next day, the driver appeared at 6 a.m. to drive me back to de Gaulle for my flight back to New York (thank goodness

for Ambien). My view of Paris over those many years was through the backseat window of the limo—if I happened to peek up from my computer or BlackBerry to check out the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. Over the summer of 2007, my wife Mechele and I took our eldest grandchild, Rebecca, to Paris for her thirteenth birthday.

Rebecca is a bright and beautiful fashionista, so where else but Paris? Mechele, being a Francophile, was thrilled as well, but I was not. I was hoping for Tuscany or the Algarve, but Rebecca was calling the shots on this one. Paris again? Ugh! My passport had more "France" stamps in it than a wine store. It was like a trader taking an exotic vacation to lower Manhattan. But what a rejuvenating experience it turned out to be. With my wife and granddaughter, I was actually on vacation, and seeing Paris for what felt like the first time. There was no computer in my pack, no business to conduct—only unscheduled fun and seeing Paris through Rebecca's young eyes. The Musée D'Orsay, climbing the Arc de Triomphe, shopping in Bon Marché, dining at the Café Marley in the Louvre and at Au Bon Accueil. Vive la France!

Flying back, I thought about this special vacation and all I had missed out on these many years. Like so many of my colleagues, I have a hard time escaping the demands that come with running a company, each day thinking about how to maintain that competitive edge. With all the issues that come up—helping employees with various tasks, staying on top of the most cutting-edge acquisitions, being there to handle important customers' issues—how does one ever go on a stress-free holiday? How do you travel today BlackBerry-free?

Like so many senior executives I know, I tended to act the part of the carefree vacationer, but I always managed to sneak away to make that phone call or get back on my PDA. Could I have become a better golfer without my cell phone on? Maybe (but only maybe). A more tuned-in traveler, a more attentive listener? For sure.

"Perspective" is a term that rarely surfaces in leadership articles. We spend more of our time analyzing life's challenges than trying to contextualize them. What I've learned is that leaders must train their focus on "brainrest." Perspective is gained when the venue changes dramatically and you have enough distance to remove yourself mentally from the usual work tensions and concerns. A great vacation can be a perspective refresher, allowing you to reset your priorities around family and friends and maybe even ponder the next chapter of your life.

These are ideas that are sometimes tough to embrace when you're knee deep in the weeds of work. Yet these are the things that make us more human and help us to create the legacies we want to impart to our loved ones. Make sure to take a moment each day and see the world through the eyes of your family, friends, and employees because at some point, you're going to want to take off the big shoes. And you're going to need help finding your sandals. ■