

Every Seven Years

A Must for Entrepreneurs

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If you've been in business at least seven years, you've got it bad. Fourteen years, you've got it twice as bad. Twenty-one years? It's like needing a triple by-pass. What is it? The seven year itch, which can lead to burnout or boredom. The cure? A month or two away from the business. Seriously!

"I felt completely disconnected for the first time in sixteen years," recounts Dan Lionelli, founder and CEO of PadTech. "Magically, two weeks into my month-long vacation, my head really cleared up, a clarity about the business and what it needs to look like literally popped into my head -- what's important and not important -- boom, there it was. It was like I had been gathering all this information over the years and the break gave 'it' time to sift itself through to give me clarity."

Now is the time to start planning your escape in 2005. The business will be fine (likely better) and you'll get a badly needed recharge to successfully lead the business another seven years. More importantly, you'll experience profound insights about your business and yourself that only come when you get away for an extended period of time.

Emotionally and physically drained from a rough two-year slump in his electronics business, this past February I challenged Lionello to take a couple months off from his 16 year old British Columbia-based company. A twenty-five employee manufacturer of mainly membrane switches (think of the keypad on your microwave oven) and other electronic subassemblies, PadTech was emerging from its slump and (in the spirit of disclosure) its executive team had just participated in my Rockefeller Habits workshop.

"The company survived," exclaimed Lionelli, when I called him shortly after his return from a month in Italy, which followed another three weeks off earlier in the summer. "Revenues were pretty much right where I expected them to be and the strong people rose to the top -- and cash flow was even better than expected!"

Breakthroughs

As for the promised ah-has, "I had taken two week vacations before, but I now know two weeks isn't enough," explains Lionelli. "That second week you're bouncing a little bit knowing you're getting back." However, with a month of continuous time off, after the first week he felt like he had this "big black hole" still in front of him, which allowed him to clear his mind.

Equally important for Lionelli, he learned that if the business can function when he's not there, then it gives him more freedom to work on where the business can go in the future. His sabbatical also proved others can do a better job day to day than him. "I'm clearer on what are the things I enjoy doing and happy doing and I'm restructuring my activities so they align with me more personally," reflects Lionelli.

"And there were several things that were bizarre, including countless people telling me I looked more relaxed than ever before," noted Lionelli, with an energy I could feel through the phone!

Preparation

He believes his insights (and the company) were helped from the three months he spent intensely preparing for his time off. Lionelli and his team had to identify a lot of things that had to get done and they got done given the deadline of the sabbatical.

Actual preparations started in March when Lionelli announced at a regular weekly meeting that "I'm going to Italy for a month and this is when I'm leaving." There were no negative responses and in fact, his employees actually told him he deserved it.

"What I didn't do was officially put someone in charge, right or wrong – but the operations manager stepped up," explained Lionelli. Lionelli also scheduled three shorter vacations in July to test the process, alternating between a week gone and a week in the office. He described it like an airplane – "the tires left the runway a couple times before taking off."

As expected, the team did have a crisis happen about a week before Lionelli left for his month. However, he just sat everyone down and put a plan in place. Once out on his month long trip, he didn't touch email and only called in three times. He credits the success of his team to having a good routine. "Daily huddles sustained them," noted Lionelli. "Everyone knew who was challenged or needed assistance and the team could react. It created real alignment and made a big difference."

In the end, when he returned there were only five phone messages, no stacks of paper, and no line-up at the door after being gone a month. However, the general consensus was it was good to have a leader back. The cheerleading side was missing.

Future

"My wife (Leanne) and children (14, 12, and 9) were in heaven," shares Lionelli. "They went through what I went through the last couple of years. And it was good that my children got to see another culture – another way of life – another way of thinking – they got to see the places they have been studying."

Further reflecting on the trip to Italy, "when you're in a farmhouse your grandfather built 70 years ago with a creek running outside the door and the roosters waking you up in the

morning, that's good." He's now looking at planning a month each year along with weeks and long weekends. Concludes Lionelli, "I think its necessary – not sure what it looks like, but believe it's necessary."

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You're gone so long you want to get back – half lie, because...