

# Leading in the summer? Think fun and focus

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Harvey Schachter

*Also in this compendium: Your Gipper moment, and what Yogi Berra and Sir Alex Ferguson can tell you about leadership*

Summer is a beach. Summer is a vacation. Summer is time with the family at the cottage. Summer is not about work.

That's often the feeling in offices, as productivity and engagement dwindle from Canada Day to Labour Day. And leaders are uncertain whether to cave into or combat the prevailing mood. On his blog consultant Kevin Eikenberry says [you must seek a delicate balance if you are to navigate through the summer months and create a successful time for your team](#).

Yes, summer is a vacation. He says that means:

- Let people really vacation: “People have earned their vacation. Let them take it. No expectations, no checking e-mail, no calling in every couple of days. Don’t just talk about work/life balance, live it,” he writes.

Of course, people may not believe you are that magnanimous, so take your own vacation to demonstrate with actions rather than just words.

- Encourage the learning that comes from being away: Ask people about their vacations – and the lessons it offered. Those may not be immediately obvious but with reflection, insights about their work usually will be found.

- Put a little vacation into the workplace: Whether it's an outdoor meeting or badminton or a barbecue at lunch, integrate some of the leisure aspects of summer into the workplace. And, of course, if projects are on track and policies allow, let people leave early on Friday.

But summer is not just a vacation and that's key to the balance you must seek. People aren't gone all summer and return to the office refreshed. To take advantage, he recommends:

- Create a summer challenge: Confirm your workplace commitment to a goal for the year by announcing a challenge for making great strides toward it over the summer. “Often a challenge is posed or a goal made more important in the last couple months of the year. When that happens, almost by magic, great progress is made. Why wait until the end of the year?” he says. And if you feel progress can't be made with so many people away, consider that having fewer folks around may give those at work a bit more time to focus on the challenge.

- Keep expectations high: Don't succumb to the excuse “everyone's on vacation.” Hold those at work to the same standards and expectations as the rest of the year.

- Capitalize on summer's energy: People are generally more alive in summer. See if you can channel that vibe for greater productivity.

## 2. Prepare your halftime speech

Marketing consultant Drew McLellan says the onset of summer marks halftime in our year's business activity. “[Are you heading into the locker room to slap everyone on the back and tell them to protect your lead](#) or are you about to give a hell-and-brimstone speech about digging deep and finding more?” he writes on his blog

Just as halftime is critical in a football game, we can choose to make this an important moment for our pursuit of

2016's business goals. As you prepare your speech, here are some questions he suggests you ask:

- How far behind are you? You have to reassess your situation. You can do better but probably not replace what has been lost.
- Are your original goals still viable or do you need to set a new goal? “You’ll waste the whole year if you keep chasing a goal that’s no longer viable,” he points out.
- What have you learned about the field of play and do you need to change the game plan? Your initial game plan was based on assumptions. Now, six months into the game, you have more data and experiences to draw on. Use them.
- What do you need to neutralize to win? Something has prevented you from being as successful as you might have been. “If you don’t neutralize it – the second half will play out pretty much how this first half did,” he warns.

Your George Gipp moment has come. The answer will tell you what message needs to be delivered to the team so like the legendary Notre Dame halfback – who implored the team to “win one for the Gipper” – you can inspire them to victory in the second half.

### 3. Follow the Yogi

Yogi Berra said that you can observe a lot by watching. Baseball managers do that, sitting back and observing their players during the game. So do soccer managers. Famed Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said: “You can see a lot more when you are not in the thick of things ... when you are a step removed from the fray, you see things that come as surprises – and it is important to allow yourself to be surprised.”

New Zealand leadership consultant Suzi McAlpine believes you should adopt that same attitude at work. “When leaders talk less, listen more – and intentionally *watch closely to what is going on around them* – they immediately begin to see subtle yet vital details – nuances that enable them to lead more effectively,” [she writes on her blog](#).

Here are some tips she offers:

- Slow down: To be skilled at observation, you must slow down rather than continue to rush through your day. Take time to ask yourself: “What is the most important thing for me to focus on today?”
- Rotate chairing of meetings: If as a leader you chair all meetings, pull back. Give others a chance to improve that skill and yourself a chance to watch your team more closely.
- Watch what others are doing: See if you can attend meetings from beyond your own unit and learn from those.
- Talk less, listen more: “Don’t overcontribute. Try to only pitch in several times throughout the meeting. Ask questions more than you offer your opinion,” she advises.
- Observe yourself: Ask a trusted colleague to give you feedback on your observable behaviour and body language in meetings. That may illuminate some blind spots.

“Observation is a powerful tool for learning. And it costs you nothing to watch more,” she stresses.

### 4. Quick hits

- [Your job is a historical artifact](#), entrepreneur Seth Godin says. It’s a list of tasks, procedures, responsibilities, and meetings that were developed over time. That makes your job a great place to hide, because if you’re doing your job, how can you fail? But work requires you to create value – something nobody else can provide – and you need to change the historical artifact known as your job for that to happen.

– A mentor need not be older. Given the range of people in organizations today, four generations from twentysomething millennials to 70-year-old veterans, and the importance of digital technology, [maybe the mentor you need is younger than you](#), advises Paul Smurl, chief operating officer of Some Spider, an Internet publisher.

– The most important aspect of your job – and a key to productivity – may be the meaningfulness of your work. But recent research shows [the only way management influenced meaningfulness at work was by destroying it](#).

To help insert meaning in work, a good question to keep asking employees is: “[Can I tell you why this matters?](#)” leadership coach Joel Garfinkle says.

– Consultant Mike Kerr hails a Budget Rent a Car office that each Friday [rewarded the employee colleagues had voted the happiest person](#). The balloons and prizes helped to keep people upbeat in the tougher months of the year.

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