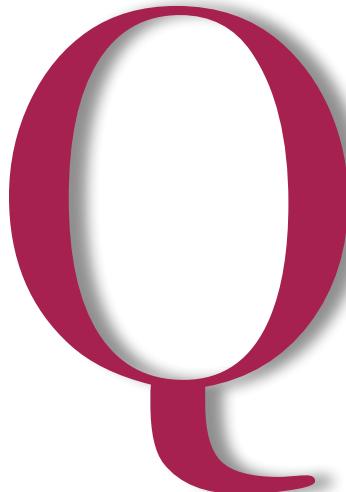




Roundtable Mentor,  
**Trevor Lewington**, Chief  
Executive Officer for  
Economic Development  
Lethbridge, shared his  
perspective on how to  
establish work boundaries  
while on vacation, without  
compromising your career.

## Mentoring **MATTERS**



*I have vacation time coming up and I'd really like to not take my laptop but my boss has a habit of emailing with work questions. How can I set some boundaries around contact with the office in a way that doesn't limit my career?*

It seems to me that many organizations used to talk about and actively promote the importance of work-life balance. Ostensibly, this meant acceptance for a clear boundary between the obligations of the job versus whatever it is you choose to do with your time off. Most corporate-speak these days has shifted to discussion about work-life integration suggesting that for many employers those boundaries are no longer so distinct. While this can mean additional flexibility to address life challenges during work hours, it has also created confusion about the intrusion of occupational demands into personal time.

*The implied (or sometimes explicitly mandated) need to check email or answer inquiries while on vacation is a symptom of the broader boundaries issue.*

So what to do?

**Have a direct and powerful conversation about your boss's needs.**

In most healthy workplaces, having a direct conversation with your boss about their needs is a good place to start. That's right. Find out what your boss needs to be successful. Why do they feel a need to send you inquiries when they know you are out of the office? It is possible that your boss's needs may be different than you think. I often work evenings and weekends around other commitments and send emails to my team. At the same time, I have reinforced the message that just because you receive an email from me does not mean that I am expecting a reply.

**Have a direct and powerful conversation about your need for a boundary.** Your boss should be open to a professional discussion about your needs for periodically severing the electronic umbilical cord to the office. There is a growing body of evidence that employees who have uninterrupted time off (even within a single day or week outside of office hours) will make less mistakes and suffer less stress, which generally results in less turnover. Emphasizing that you really want to do your best and contribute fully, and that vacation time away will help you deliver on that commitment, is actually rooted in fact. While only you will know the corporate culture and the information needs of your boss, outlining your concerns about being able to set a boundary should be seen as a worthwhile conversation.

**Provide alternatives.** Depending on the size of your organization, are there other members of the team who can fill the void and provide support in your absence? Is cross-training or a brief work-with required before you go? Are there other potential reference materials like checklists, policy manuals or additional internal resources that might be available to support your boss with his/her questions? None of us should be irreplaceable. And, ensuring bench strength on the team for your role should be a joint responsibility for both you and your boss.

**Consult your co-workers.** Chances are that you are not alone in your concerns. And, like you, the rest of the team may be hesitant to speak up. Anonymous 360 evaluation tools can sometimes help to bring these issues to the surface. A group conversation is another approach to bring forward your concerns without being seen as a whiner.

With all of that said, if you still feel like the red flashing career limiting move warning light is going off, consider a few options to help mitigate the amount of time you will need to steal from your vacation by:

**Agree on a mutually convenient check-in point.** Set a mutually convenient date and time in advance where you will check-in with the boss and catch up on all the issues at once. Providing a designated window of access will hopefully limit additional inquiries.

**Set up an out of office.** Let your auto-responder reply for you. It can serve as a reminder of your absence and emphasize that you will not be checking messages until a specific date. I had a colleague that took a four week leave and indicated in his out of office message that all messages received while he was away would be deleted and that anything requiring attention would need to be resent upon his return. True to his word, he promptly deleted everything in his inbox upon his return to work.

**Provide the shortest reply possible.** If you do have to reply, try to minimize the back and forth and remind your boss that you are away. Consider a few subtle reminders like: "I'll be sure to look this over and respond when I'm back in the office." "I've made a note to dig deeper into this just as soon as I'm back in the office."



**Trevor Lewington** is the Chief Executive Officer for Economic Development Lethbridge. Trevor holds a Bachelor of Commerce with a major in Human Resource Management, completed a Change Leadership Certificate with Cornell University and is a Chartered Professional in Human Resources (CPHR) through CPHR Alberta. Trevor is also a Certified Logistics Professional (CCLP) through the Canadian Institute of Traffic and Transportation.

Trevor is engaged and involved in his community and is honoured to serve as the Mayor in the Village of Stirling. Trevor is also an active member of the Board of Directors for the Plant Protein Alliance of Alberta, Economic Developers Alberta as well as Intelligent Community Forum – Canada.



**Glain Roberts-McCabe** is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.