

EVALUATION SUMMARY

Rest, Renewal, and Rejuvenation: Outcomes of a Compensated Sabbatical Experience among Senior Staff Employed by Nonprofit Organizations in Los Angeles County

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Introduction

This study measured the impact of a compensated sabbatical experience on the professional and personal lives of 25 executives of non-profit organizations who are alumni of the Durfee Sabbatical Program.

During the summer of 2001, I approached the Durfee Foundation seeking permission to study their experience with the Sabbatical Program in order provide data for my dissertation Rest, Renewal, and Rejuvenation: Outcomes of a Compensated Sabbatical Experience among Senior Staff Employed by Nonprofit Organizations in Los Angeles County.

Methodology

I developed a phenomenological research plan that brought together a blend of both quantitative and qualitative data. An extensive written survey was administered among Sabbatical Program alumni coupled with personal interviews among all interested alumni as well as with the person(s) who served as the interim leader(s) during the sabbatical period. Twenty-five of then 26 Sabbatical Program alumni agreed to participate, providing an overall response rate of 96%. Fifteen interim leaders across the 26 organizations were located and agreed to be interviewed providing a response rate of 58%.

The majority of data from the survey was geared toward my dissertation research and sought to quantify outcomes related to work-life balance and work practices post-sabbatical. The face-to-face interviews I conducted refined the data as it related to specific and emergent themes obtained in the survey. For the Foundation the interview component provided the opportunity to pose questions not previously asked and to raise these questions among a group of persons who had been previously underestimated as

sources of critical feedback – the secondary or interim leaders who held the reins of the organization while the leader was away on sabbatical.

Findings

Data from the questionnaires provided interesting insights into organizational behavior and capacity issues as identified by leaders during their sabbatical. An illustration of these issues is demonstrated within the following excerpts from the questionnaire and findings.

Responding to “*During my sabbatical experience, I reflected on the following organizational and management issues, in relation to my skill set*” the highest-rated responses were:

- my organization’s strategic planning and/or visioning needs;
- my delegation of work duties to other staff and consultants; and
- my executive leadership traits and qualities.

When answering “*Upon returning to work from my sabbatical experience, I sought additional education/training/ information on the following organizational/management issues, in relation to my skill set*” the most frequently endorsed responses were:

- strategic planning;
- management style and practices; and
- executive leadership.

Answering “*Upon my return to work from sabbatical, my Board and I renewed our focus on...*” the occurrence of highest-rated responses included:

- strategic planning;
- fundraising; and
- board structure/ membership.

Regarding the statement “*During my sabbatical experience, I reflected on the following management issues, in relation to my staff/employees*” the most frequently endorsed responses were:

- strengthening leadership skills;
- strengthening management skills; and
- succession management and planning.

As was anticipated, the sabbatical awardees were grateful for the gift of compensated time provided them through the grant to their organization. Interestingly, the majority of these awardees were equally appreciative of and honored by Durfee’s public acknowledgment during the grant award ceremony of their personal contributions and sacrifices made on behalf of their organizations and their constituencies.

Recommendations Drawn from Durfee’s Experience

Durfee believes that the fundamental processes of the Sabbatical Program in support the awardees’ rest, renewal, and rejuvenation is well understood and continues to meet the Foundation’s grant making objective. As mentioned earlier, the Los Angeles experience suggests that developing in-house leadership among second tier leaders is more challenging than originally anticipated. Funders or policy developers considering sabbatical type opportunities may want to consider:

- Deepening or intensifying the sabbatical experience within organizations in order to initiate long-term succession planning and staff development.
- As part of sabbatical application, dedicate substantial consideration to applicants’ abilities to assess the secondary leadership’s readiness and capacity to assume the senior leadership role.
- Building in cash incentives to secondary leaders who have risen to the occasion and plan opportunities to publicly acknowledge these interim leaders.

- Asking applicants to describe in detail how secondary leaders will be supported in their knowledge of and decision making in regards to complex issues such as board management, labor law or personnel issues, fundraising, and media relations. Be prepared to provide funding for management assistance for such issues as necessary.
- Developing an evaluation strategy that provides pre- and post-sabbatical data regarding issues such as maintaining manageable work hours, vacation usage patterns, delegation of responsibility among staff, board involvement, staff retention, future career goals, and impact on human resource policies (e.g. flex hours, compensatory time, institutionalized sabbatical policy, etc.).

Conclusion

Within academic and religious institutions, where Sabbaticals are a norm, a priority is typically placed on the participants' tangible outcomes (e.g. newly organized hymnals or new research for future publication). Durfee places no such expectations on its participants to produce tangible products as an outcome of their sabbatical. In fact, Durfee strongly discourages participants from engaging in professional development opportunities such as conferences and work related seminars, or even contacting their organizations, during the sabbatical period, in the belief that rest and renewal are critically needed to counter professional burn-out in the field of nonprofit service delivery.

This study suggests that nonprofit leaders who engaged in a compensated sabbatical did spend their time focusing on personal renewal and rejuvenation, but also spent time immersed in thought regarding their own professional development, the development of their organization, and the development of their employees. From an organizational development standpoint this is a win-win situation for both the leader and the nonprofit organization.

Furthermore, this study offers no support for a doomsday scenario – one that may suggest an extended absence by the leader will throw the organization in to chaos or financial hardship. This study suggests that most leaders returned from sabbatical feeling refreshed and with a renewed passion for their work and for the mission of their organization. Leaders aggressively translated this renewed commitment to their work into action by retooling their skill sets and reorganizing the way they carried out their job functions. Most leaders went on to report better work/life balances, healthier minds and bodies, and a stronger appreciation for the need for employees of nonprofit organizations to take a break from work and engage in sabbatical without the fear of losing income or losing their job.

In short, the sabbatical experience was a powerful opportunity for each awardee and empowered them with the understanding that life adjustments, both professional and personal, are within their span of control.

For additional information regarding this study's process or outcomes, please feel free to contact me at stewartron@earthlink.net or 626.644.0619.