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Leadership And Managing People

Want to Be a Better Leader? Stop Thinking About Work After Hours.

by Remy E. Jennings, Allison S. Gabriel, and Klodiana Lanaj

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Summary.   It's not uncommon for managers to continue thinking about their job, even after the official workday is over. This may involve ruminating about an issue with an employee, trying to think of a solution to a client problem, or creating a mental to-do list for the next day....   **more**

Are you a manager who often finds yourself thinking about work late into the night? Do you tend to continue to stress over work-related problems, or do you switch off your mind and relax in the evening?

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If you are like many managers, you may feel a need to stay constantly connected with work, even after formal working hours. Given the high demands of a leadership role, you may perceive that the only way to perform well is to work around the clock. As a result, you find yourself ruminating about an issue with an employee, trying to think of a solution to a client problem, or creating a mental to-do list long after you have left the office for the day or turned off your computer.

Our research, recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology,* suggests that constantly thinking about work may hurt rather than help your performance as a leader. We found that not taking a break from work in the evening backfired for leaders, especially for those new to managerial roles, because it drained their mental resources. Instead, leadership effectiveness was highest on days in which leaders mentally turned off from work the night before and were able to recharge.

To understand how off-work time affected leaders' performance, we conducted a 10-day daily diary study with 73 leaders and a matched follower (i.e., an employee who directly reports to the leader). Each morning before work, we asked the leaders to reflect on their experiences the night before and report on their detachment from work (that is, the extent to which they cognitively switched off from work) and their rumination (the extent to which they had pervasive and recurrent negative thoughts about work). We then asked them how energized they felt during the workday and how much they identified with their role as a leader.

We found that when leaders detached from their work in the evenings, they felt more recharged the next day, which helped them to identify more strongly with their leader role. On the other hand, on days when leaders ruminated about work in the evening, they felt more drained the next morning, hindering their ability

to identify as a leader. Because it takes energy to deal with leadership responsibilities, exhausted leaders may be unable or unwilling to fully immerse themselves in being a leader.

These results are clearly important for leaders' own experiences at work — but what about for their followers? To answer this question, we asked one follower of each leader to rate their leader's effectiveness at the end of each workday. Followers rated leaders who detached from their work the night before — and who, therefore, felt more recharged and connected to their leader role in the morning — as more transformational and powerful that day at work. In contrast, followers rated leaders who ruminated about work the night before — and who, therefore, felt more drained and less connected to their leader role in the morning — as less transformational and powerful at the end of that workday. Leaders who disconnected from work at night, therefore, were perceived as being more effective leaders the next day.

Interestingly, we found that the negative effects of ruminating after work were particularly pronounced for leaders who were newer in their positions. Inexperienced leaders might find after-hours rumination particularly draining because they have less practice managing the challenges of leadership. Finding rhythms of rest and recovery after work may be especially beneficial for those who are entering leadership roles for the first time.

Our findings offer a few practical recommendations for leaders:

Find ways to detach after work.

Our work emphasizes that it is important for leaders to find ways to detach from their leadership responsibilities after work. Leaders have a tendency to overwork and feel the need to always be available, but our results legitimize disconnecting from work and taking time to recover rather than continuing to think about work until late into the evening. Whether it is mastering a new hobby, exercising, spending time with loved ones, or simply reading a book to relax, leaders may be wise to find activities that they enjoy in the evening to turn their thoughts away from work.

Establish boundaries between work and home.

Our work also speaks to the need to establish mental boundaries between work and home, especially for new leaders. Leaders tend to influence the communication norms for their teams, so clearly delineating one's hours of availability to one's employees may be helpful in ensuring adequate time each day to recover after work. Furthermore, creating guidelines for oneself about when work-related interruptions are allowed during non-work hours (e.g., what situations constitute leadership emergencies) may be a helpful practice both for leaders, and the individuals a leader supervises.

Our results may also offer comfort to leaders early in their careers who desire to separate work from home but worry that disconnecting in the evenings will hurt their performance. Our study shows that the reverse is true — inexperienced leaders are rated as more effective by their followers when they refrain from ruminating about work in the evenings because they are more recharged and connected to their leader role the next day.

Use recovery time to combat depletion and enhance your identity as a leader.

Lastly, our research suggests that leaders should be cognizant of how they spend their non-work time because people need energy to connect with their work roles each day. Leadership is hard, and those feeling refreshed in the morning may be more emboldened to take on leadership responsibilities compared to those leaders who start their workday feeling drained. Ultimately, leaders need to be intentional about managing their energy after hours. Barring emergencies, when at home, they need to disconnect from leadership responsibilities and recharge by engaging in family or leisure activities.

In sum, our work counters the notion that leaders need to stay connected to their work at all hours to perform well in the eyes of their employees. Instead, we find that leaving work behind at the end of the day plays a key role in developing successful leaders.

Remy E. Jennings is an Assistant Professor of Management and Dean's Emerging Scholar in the College of Business at Florida State University. Her research focuses on leadership development and effectiveness, employee well-being, and positive mindsets at work.

Allison S. Gabriel is the Thomas J. Howatt Chair in Management and Faculty Director of the Center for Working Well at Purdue University's Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr. School of Business. Her research focuses on emotions at work, employee recovery and well-being, interpersonal processes, and motivation.

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Klodiana Lanaj is the Martin L. Schaffel Professor at the Warrington College of Business at University of Florida. Klodiana studies leader effectiveness and well-being with a focus on understanding mindsets and behaviors that best enable leaders to be successful at work and to thrive at work and beyond.

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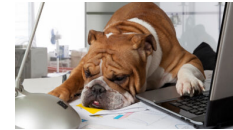
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