Leadership 101: Your Weekend Emails Are Sending a Message You May Not Intend

Why executive leaders must model the work-life balance they expect their employees to maintain

One of the simplest tests of executive leadership happens when the workweek ends.

It is Friday evening. An executive has a few minutes to catch up on email. Or perhaps they are working Sunday morning, preparing for the week ahead. They send several messages to their leadership team, fully intending that no one respond until Monday.

Seems harmless enough. But is it?

The executive may believe they are simply managing their own time. Their employees may interpret those emails differently: If my boss is working, should I be working too? If I do not respond, will I appear less committed? Is this what it takes to succeed here?

An executive who genuinely supports work-life balance may be unintentionally undermining it.

Leaders Create Culture Through Their Behavior

Leadership is not simply what we communicate. It is what we model. Executives have an outsized influence on organizational culture because their behaviors establish expectations, whether explicitly stated or not.

An executive can encourage employees to disconnect, take vacations, and prioritize family. But when that same executive regularly sends emails at 9 p.m. or on Sunday mornings, employees receive two competing messages. When words and actions conflict, people often take their cues from actions.

People pay attention to what leaders do, not simply what leaders say.

The Research: After-Hours Communication Has Consequences

Organizational research supports the importance of boundaries between work and personal life. Studies of after-hours email expectations have linked perceived pressure to monitor work communication with anxiety and difficulty psychologically detaching from work. Research on email urgency bias also finds that recipients often overestimate how quickly senders expect replies, even when a message is not urgent.

This does not mean every weekend email causes harm. Context matters: the nature of the work, genuine urgency, the team's norms, and whether people truly feel free to wait until

working hours. But the evidence gives leaders a strong reason to consider how their messages are received.

An email may take a leader 30 seconds to send, but the perceived expectation it creates can last all weekend.

Intent Is Not the Same as Impact

A common response from executives is: “I do not expect anyone to respond until Monday.” That may be entirely sincere. Yet leadership effectiveness requires understanding the difference between intention and impact.

Power dynamics matter. Employees pay attention to what senior leaders value, reward, and demonstrate. A leader’s personal preference for working on weekends can unintentionally become a team expectation. Employees may hesitate to challenge that expectation when performance ratings and advancement opportunities are influenced by the people sending those messages.

The question is not simply, What did I intend? It is, What experience am I creating for the people I lead?

Work-Life Balance Is a Leadership Responsibility

Organizations can offer wellness programs, flexible schedules, and generous time-off policies. Those efforts are valuable, but their credibility suffers when leadership behaviors contradict the culture the organization claims to value.

This is especially important in demanding settings such as healthcare, where some roles require genuine around-the-clock coverage. The goal is not to eliminate necessary communication. It is to distinguish what is truly urgent from what can wait, and to make expectations explicit.

Five Simple Ways Executives Can Model Better Boundaries

1. Schedule emails rather than sending them. If you choose to work on weekends, schedule nonurgent messages for the next working day.

2. Establish clear communication expectations. Define what constitutes an emergency, who is on call, and which channels should be used for urgent matters.

3. Model the behaviors you encourage. Take time off, disconnect when possible, and demonstrate that recovery supports sustained performance.

4. Pay attention to unintended signals. Ask employees how leadership communication patterns affect their ability to disconnect; listen without defensiveness.

5. Hold senior leaders accountable. Make healthy boundaries a shared leadership expectation rather than a matter of individual manager preference.

The Leadership 101 Test

Executive leadership is complex. Leaders navigate strategy, financial performance, organizational change, talent development, and competing priorities. But some of the most important leadership lessons are remarkably simple.

If you want people to feel empowered, demonstrate trust. If you want people to speak openly, listen without defensiveness. If you want people to maintain healthy boundaries, respect those boundaries yourself.

And if you want employees to disconnect on weekends, consider what message you send when your name appears in their inbox on Sunday morning.

Leadership is not only about the culture we aspire to create. It is about the culture our everyday behaviors actually create.

Sometimes, the simplest act of leadership is choosing “Schedule Send” instead of “Send.”

Selected Research

Becker, W. J., Belkin, L. Y., & Tuskey, S. E. (2021). A study of organizational expectations for after-hours email monitoring and employee well-being. Journal of Management.

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