



Why Sabbatical?

This document explores the transformative power of sabbaticals, reframing them not as an extended vacation or a burn-out recovery period, but as a critical transformational period in a leader's long-term growth trajectory. While burn-out recovery and prevention are important potential benefits of a sabbatical, a sabbatical is a normal and necessary rhythm in the life of a leader—its primary purpose has less to do with burn-out and more to do with building trust and faith.

This guide provides a framework for understanding sabbaticals, delves into the essential elements of a sabbatical and its phases, and explains the essential role a coach can play in the sabbatical process. Our aim is to provide clarity and inspiration for leaders and their organizations as they cultivate cultures that recognize rest as a primary pathway to spiritual growth.

What is a Sabbatical?

A sabbatical is a designated period of time when a leader steps away from regular responsibilities for rest, renewal, reflection, delight, discovery, and experimentation. It's a liminal space, a time between two life phases, where an old operating system ends and a new one emerges. It is an intentional time for the leader to deepen their understanding of themselves, their world, and their calling.

Rooted in the biblical concept of Sabbath—a time for remembrance, rest and ceasing from regular work—the sabbatical echoes God's example at creation. His sabbath command for his people highlights its importance for spiritual and physical well-being.

A typical sabbatical is defined by:

- Three phases (Endings, Neutral zone, New Beginnings)
- A date the neutral phase will end
- A Do/Don't Do list

Its defining characteristic is the neutral zone. This is a time of profound spiritual work, primarily in the heart of the leader. Some describe it as disorienting, lonely, and painful. Others describe it as liberating, renewing, and delightful.

A Do/Don't Do list is helpful to distinguish this season as set apart from other seasons. While a sabbatical is often characterized by the "Don't Do" section of the list, it's important for the leader to also think through what he will do. The "Do" section's primary attribute is delight. Focused on delight, it answers the question: "Where will you find delight during your Neutral Zone?"

Why take a Sabbatical?

The primary purpose of a sabbatical is to transform a leader into something new. Similar to the Israelite journey from Egypt through the wilderness, and into the promised land, the Israelites were transformed. They had to become something other than what they were in Egypt.

God sent them into the wilderness as a form of baptism making a new nation out of a people who were not a nation. A sabbatical is a time where God installs a new operating system and a renewed identity into the heart of a leader.

The primary area of transformation is trust. Just as the Israelites learned to trust God's direction by cloud and fire, trust God's provision by manna, trust his character by his forgiveness, and trust his faithfulness by bringing them into the promised land, so he does in the life of a leader. It's a time to gain a deeper revelation of a loving God. This is the true power of a sabbatical.

Is a Sabbatical for me?

Several indicators may suggest an approaching sabbatical season:

The Invitation - The primary indicator is an inner voice saying "Come away with me." This can be difficult to discern, but it's present in deep quiet. A sabbatical is a way to respond to

Jesus's invitation "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest..and you will find rest for your soul." Matt 11:28&29

Depleted Deep Energy Levels - The familiar rhythms of restoration begin to falter. Energy levels dip and remain low, requiring greater effort to maintain equilibrium. Minor setbacks become disproportionately challenging, and relational difficulties leave a lingering sense of exhaustion. For instance, an email that once sparked fleeting anger might now trigger a prolonged period of unease, stretching from hours or a day to days or weeks. This persistent weariness suggests a need for a deeper, more profound renewal.

Major Life Change - A change in position or responsibilities at work, a major relationship change or a death, a geographical move. Taking a neutral period between two major seasons can be a natural time to take a sabbatical.

Ineffective Patterns. Old ways of processing information, communicating, relating to God, or producing results are no longer as effective. There's a sense of new tools being available, but uncertainty about how to access them.

The F-150 Factory - A Metaphor for Sabbaticals

Imagine the Ford Motor Company deciding to transform a factory renowned for producing Ford Tauruses into a facility that will now create Ford F-150s. This isn't simply a matter of switching out parts; it's a fundamental shift in purpose. The factory, once masterful at crafting Tauruses, is now called to something new, something more robust. The process begins with *Endings*. The Taurus production line slows, then halts. Some tools, some processes, are retired forever. This ending, though it may seem counterintuitive, is essential. It's a necessary clearing away of the old to make way for the new.

Then comes the *Neutral Zone*. The factory floor falls silent. No Tauruses roll off the line. But within the heart of the facility, a profound transformation is underway. Like master engineers retooling for a new product, the very essence of the factory is being reshaped. Machines that once installed windows are now being calibrated to fit tires. Equipment used for door handles is being repurposed for exhaust pipes. From the outside, it appears as though nothing is happening. But within, unseen, the essential work of transformation is taking place.

Finally, the *New Beginnings* phase dawns. F-150s begin to emerge from the factory, gleaming and new. Yet, the transformation isn't complete. Some trucks may be missing a tire, an engine, or perhaps the paint isn't quite right. Refinement is necessary. Adjustments

must be made. The factory, though producing a similar product—a vehicle—is now creating something fundamentally different, something stronger, more capable. The transformation, though challenging, has yielded a new creation. Just like the factory, the leader emerges from a sabbatical—similar yet altogether transformed.

A Three-Phase Sabbatical Plan

A typical sabbatical is structured into three phases, each with its own purpose and focus:

- **Endings Phase:** Prepare for time away—outline duties, train others, delegate, communicate with key relationships and teams, hand off responsibilities, and leave the organization stable and prepared.
- **Neutral Zone:** Protected and isolated time for deep connection with God. Disconnecting from routine, reflecting on the past, and processing the journey with the coach.
- **New Beginnings Phase:** Re-engaging with the organization, establishing new patterns, sharing stories from the Neutral Phase, and integrating sabbatical growth into leadership.

Sabbatical for the team staying behind

A sabbatical is a powerful opportunity for the entire community to deepen their trust in God. While the leader embarks on their individual journey, the team remaining behind is also called to a new level of reliance and faith. As they step into new roles and responsibilities, they, too, may experience a kind of "neutral zone," a period of uncertainty and growth. Team leaders may concurrently hear an invitation to trust as they help their team navigate these challenges with a new level of grace.

This transition for the team can be challenging, and the support of a coach can be essential. A coach can help the team navigate the disorientation, identify areas where God is stretching them, and recognize the ways in which He is equipping them for greater things. This communal journey of trust will ultimately strengthen the team and the team leader as they move forward together.

Why Does a Sabbatical Need a Coach?

A sabbatical coach offers guidance, support, and accountability. A coach helps the leader:

- **Plan for the Neutral Zone:** Systematically address areas needing attention in preparation for the neutral zone
- **Process Disorientation:** Navigate the purposeful destabilization and disorientation that occurs when stepping away from routine, calling, and familiar identities.
- **Gain Perspective:** Provide an objective lens and ask challenging questions to encourage deeper reflection.
- **Identify God's Invitations:** Help discern opportunities for growth and how to partner with God's unique grace exhibited during this growth phase.
- **Maintain Focus:** Help stay focused on emerging patterns and avoid reverting to old habits.
- **Discern the Spirit's Work:** Discover and recognize the spirit's active presence. During a sabbatical, the Spirit's work is often painful and disorienting, making it challenging to perceive.
- **Engage New Beginnings with Confidence**

Conclusion

May this exploration of sabbaticals inspire leaders and organizations to embrace the power of rest, not as an escape from responsibility, but as a pathway to greater faithfulness, deeper trust, and more transformative leadership. From the initial invitation to rest, to the purposeful endings, into the transformative Neutral Zone, and the intentional new beginnings, may we all come to Him and find rest for our souls.

Recommended Sabbatical Resources

Bridges, William, et al. *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Lifelong Books, an Imprint of Perseus Books, LLC., 2019. ISBN: 978-0738285405

Loehr, Jim, and Tony Schwartz. *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*. Free Press, 2004. ISBN: 978-0743226752