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Finding fresh perspective

An ad executive returned from sabbatical extols the many virtues of using a 'time out' to rediscover lessons for the business world

By LEE NADLER

FORUM

THE TOUGH BUSINESS climate has forced fewer people to take on even more work. Many others are struggling to find the next job opportunity.

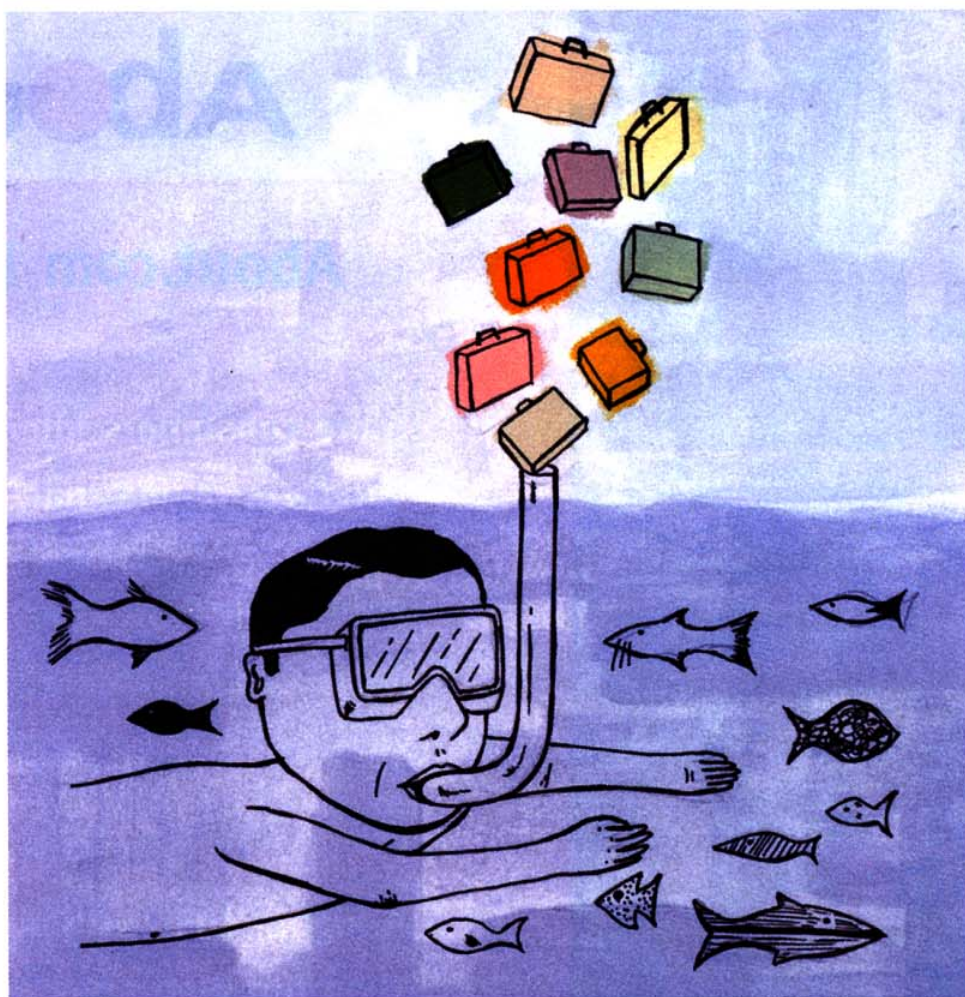
With summer upon us, whether you are overworked on the job or overworked looking for work, it's understandable to look forward to a much-needed time-out. A common approach is to spend the first portion of such a break struggling to forget about work and the last few days worrying about the size of the pile awaiting your return. Any sense of relaxation that you did gain usually wears off within a few days (if you're lucky) of getting back into your daily routine.

Taking a fresh look at your time-out can change this pattern. While it is certainly important to disassociate from the daily grind now and again, a time-out also provides an ideal opportunity to see your approach to work and colleagues from a fresh perspective. Then, when you do return, new approaches can be incorporated.

LESSONS IN A CAVE

I discovered this for myself and it convinced me it can work for others, too. After more than a dozen years in the marketing/media/-interactive business, I took a sabbatical to Australia and New Zealand. Everyday adventures and the wonders of nature provided metaphors for clear observations about our business from a completely different perspective. Here's how it worked for me.

■ Put your feet on my shoulders—collaboration is key. The rushing water carried a dozen of us, each in a wet suit and inner tube, through caves that ran for miles. The Kiwis call it black-water rafting. Except for the miner's light on our helmet, and millions of fluorescent-blue glowworms, there was no light. When the water moved too fast, the only way to slow down was to form a human chain by placing your feet on the shoulders of the person in front of you. Alone we would quickly lose control and slam into a cave wall. Together we could sit back and enjoy the ride.



JOEL HOLLAND

It gave me a new appreciation for teamwork. The team dynamic and collaboration process may be the most important, yet undernourished, aspects of our industry. It's the individual that's most often lauded. We may come up with an idea on our own but it cannot be realized without a succession of others sharing a common purpose. As in black-water rafting, we depend on teammates and they upon us.

■ A fish of many parts—diversity equals greater creativity. Diving in the Great Barrier Reef opened my eyes to the magic that can transpire when different elements are combined. The parrot fish has a blue-green body streaked with pink and yellow stripes and wore what I could have sworn was purple lipstick.

More than colorful, it is an evolution from the combination of several species. It eats algae that damage the coral, turning it into fertilizer and thus reinvigorating the ecosystem.

The most spectacular outcomes occur in nature when once seemingly unique forces come together. Yet take a good look at our in-

dustry and you don't see much diversity. How can we continue to thrive as a creative community if we look at things from a single-minded perspective? It's smart business to have a team that can appeal to consumers of different backgrounds in our interdependent world. We must do more to attract and empower people of multiple races, backgrounds and sensibilities. The outcome may be reinvigorating for our industry's ecosystem.

■ Four million people, 50 million sheep: Who's the boss? In New Zealand, there are 4 million people and 50 million sheep. Farmers realize the sheep put clothes on their backs and money in their pockets. They must provide a healthy environment for the herd to prosper. In return, the sheep don't have it too bad—grazing, exercise and free hair cuts.

WHAT FARMERS KNOW

While ego plays a major role in our business, no matter how high you get on the ladder you're part of the whole. The agency CEO answers to the client, which answers to its board, which answers to Wall Street. We all answer to the consumer. Many managers forget the position they were promoted from and tend to keep the staff reporting to them down. That's a shame. When individuals grow, the company can truly grow; just as a good year for the sheep is a good year for the farmer.

I recall a colleague's comment when he was faced with a challenge: "I can't think right now; I'm working." Many of us are encouraged to think outside the box. This is nearly impossible when you are too close to a situation. I believe that to truly gain a new perspective one must actually get out of the box. Then take a good look around. ■

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