

# How to Ask Your Boss for Time to Learn New Things

by Rachael O'Meara

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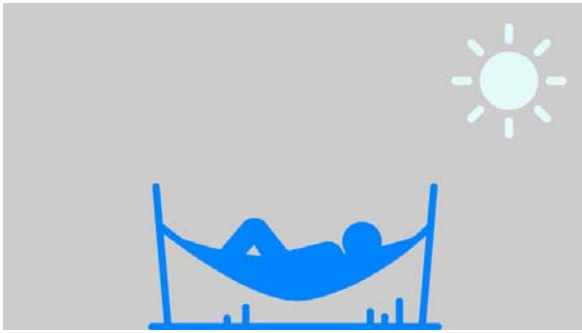


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We all want to learn and grow. Improving our skills and being exposed to new ideas not only makes us better at our jobs but makes us happier and more engaged at work. But with a full-time job, it can be tough to find the time and resources to dedicate to personal development. Some people, like me, are lucky to work for companies that encourage and even fund classes, sabbaticals, or fellowships. But if you work for a company that doesn't have an official policy, how can you make the case to your manager (and the necessary higher ups) to support you?

In researching my book, *Pause*, and learning from my own experience of figuring out how to take time off for my own growth, I've come up with a six-step plan for how to negotiate for personal development.

1. **Identify *how* you want to learn and grow.** If you don't yet have a clear picture of what you want to develop, spend time honing in on exactly what you need. Do you want to build your emotional intelligence skills to be a more attuned business leader? Are you interested in going on a yoga or meditation retreat? Set aside a specific period of time, such as one evening or even a week, to explore ideas and research what appeals to you. Write down what you want to learn and how you would grow from the experience you've identified. Research shows that the physical act of writing has a neurological effect on the brain which tells the cerebral cortex to "wake up and pay attention." Writing stimulates a bunch of cells in the brain called the Reticular Activating System that plays a key role in being more conscious and alert. The more you can write down, the more aware and real your ideas become.
2. **Own it.** You may be under the impression that building an underdeveloped skill means you lack a competency or have a particular weakness. This isn't the case. Rather than being embarrassed or nervous about asking for this time, own it as part of your commitment to becoming a better leader. If you aren't willing to consider it a growth move for you and your company, you can't expect others to support you.
3. **Create your vision statement.** Ask yourself, "Who will I become as a result of this investment of my time and resources?" Be specific and descriptive. Keep it in the first person. One sentence is ideal. Use descriptive adjectives. Will you be more engaged, influential, or mindful? Visions are a great way to orient and stay on track before, during, and after your development work. As I've learned from my mentors, Bob and Judith Wright, your vision should be constantly evolving as you do. The vision I created for my leadership training this year was: "I fully engage as a more authentic woman leader." Add whatever details you feel necessary to convey your vision to those who will approve the time and resources you need.
4. **Connect your goals or outcomes to what the business needs.** To get buy in from your manager, team, or company to support your development, you have to connect what you'll gain to the business goals. Ask yourself:
  - Are there issues at work that you could better resolve as a result of this training? In what ways will your company benefit from your improved performance, skills, or knowledge?
  - What specific skills or knowledge can you share with your manager, team, and/or company from your training or experience?
  - Can you provide a recap (verbally or visually) based on what you learned or how you plan to apply this at work or in your career?



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questions or concerns from your boss. I have yet to meet someone who was let go for asking to expand their horizons. Often times our fear holds us back from negotiating, and we miss out on the opportunity to explore alternatives, or worse, receive a yes.

Make a list of what is negotiable - things like timing, budget, and activity. Is partial or full reimbursement possible? Can you avoid using vacation days? One colleague of mine negotiated time off for a week-long leadership retreat where her manager agreed to her taking vacation for only 50% of the time she was out. The other 50% she was on the company clock.

When preparing for the conversation, think about what each person involved in making the decision has to gain. Do your homework and read up on your HR policies. Know how educational reimbursement works in your company.

6. **Make your ask.** When you're ready to sit down with your manager, don't catch them off guard. Give them ample notice and consider adding it to the agenda for your next one-on-one meeting. But it doesn't have to be a formal meeting. If you're catching up on how the weekend was or plans for the evening, share the class that caught your eye and why it personally matters to you. Better yet, share how you think it could help you be a better employee. Then you can schedule more time to discuss it further.

Share your vision and goals. Be clear what exactly you're asking for – is it for time off, compensation (expenses), or some combination of the two? What will they get in return? Refer to your notes if needed.

When the conversation is over, consider following up in writing, emphasizing how this would benefit you and your manager, team, or business.

There are three likely outcomes: getting what you've asked for, getting some of what you asked for, or getting a flat out "no." By following these steps, you'll increase the chances that you get a favorable outcome but that's not always the case. Even if you don't get what you asked for, start thinking about ways you can reshape your request in the future.

Spending the time to form a logical, careful request can be rewarding in itself because you're getting clearer on what you need. And you're contributing to, maybe even igniting, a corporate culture that supports individuals to learn and grow in ways beyond what's traditionally done.

Over the past four years I've used the above process to request and win support for a coaching certification, graduate and non-accredited courses, week-long emotional intelligence leadership retreats, and a two-day class influencing. In each case, it felt like a leap of faith but I always reminded myself that the worst they can say is no.

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