Vacation—When and How Much?

Dear Labby,

I am a second-year graduate student and get on very well with my PI. We are very excited, as together we have made a fundamental discovery in our competitive field. In fact, I am about to start writing a major paper as the first author, and this should be a great help for my PI’s upcoming grant renewal. My rapid progress is partly because I work day and night and only took one day of vacation last year. But all that work has left me feeling really burned out, so in two months I am going on a well-deserved four-week vacation to Africa with a friend and have already bought my airline tickets! When I told my PI I would be away for a month, he seemed very upset and then muttered, “Hope you don’t get scooped in the meantime.” As I didn’t take much time off last year, I did not expect this response. This has affected our relationship and he now bugs me for progress in repeating experiments and assembling figures. Is he being reasonable?

—Burned-Out

Dear Burned-Out,

Labby is glad to hear that your project is going so well. You must be excited to be preparing such an important publication. Well done!

Your question touches on two issues. Let’s take the easiest and most important one first: open communication from both sides. You seem to have a good working relationship with your PI, so Labby wonders why you didn’t discuss the vacation plans before purchasing the tickets. Could it be that you knew your PI would be upset so you wanted to present it fait accompli? In reflecting on the situation, wouldn’t it have been better to discuss this openly and explain why you feel you deserve this vacation? And when it would be best to schedule it? It is not surprising your PI is upset, but he also seems kind enough not to make an issue of it and tell you to cancel your trip. His anxiety about assembling the paper almost certainly stems from the competitive nature of the field, and the need to get this work accepted in time for his grant renewal. However, he also needs to be open in his expectations; he should have discussed his policy about vacations.

Which brings up the second issue: How much vacation is it reasonable to take? This is very lab dependent and again needs to be discussed openly. Some PIs do not like students to take any vacation (and there is no law that says students, or even paid employees, are entitled to vacation). However, an average of two weeks’ vacation a year seems to be about the norm. Labby is a bit unusual in having a very flexible attitude toward vacations: Students should work hard and enjoy their work, but also play hard on vacation to have a full life. Labby has no firm rules but expects a reasonable balance between work and vacation and requires students to discuss plans before they book vacations. With this balance in mind, Labby has actually encouraged an occasional burned-out student to take a week of vacation to restore his or her excitement and ability to make progress.

So what would Labby advise? First apologize to your PI for not discussing your trip before you booked it, and then have an open discussion about vacations. This will clear the air and you will both feel better. You will likely find that this restores your friendship and allows for your continued shared success.

—Labby

Got Questions?

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