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While I'm Gone

## **Transitioning Into – and Back From – Family and Medical Leave**

**By Carla Thompson**  
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With the birth of his son, Quincy, last spring, Phillip Williams took a six-month paternity leave from his job. "I wanted to experience the birth and the early days. I wanted to exhaust all of the resources I had to spend time with [him]," explains Williams, who was working as executive producer of BET.com at the time. According to the 2000 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) survey, which was conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, 75% of workers took some kind of leave from their jobs in 1999.

Many employees are conflicted about taking extended leaves. Most are fearful of losing their jobs. But under the FMLA, employees are allowed 12 weeks a year of unpaid leave and a guarantee that they will have the same or equivalent job (in terms of pay, benefits, and other employment terms and conditions) if they work at a company with 50 or more employees, have worked at the company for at least 12 months, and have worked at least 1,250 hours over the previous 12 months. Requirements can vary from state to state.

Beverly Kaye is the co-author of *Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers; \$17.95) and the founder and CEO of Career Systems International, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in talent management. Kaye says that although many employees are reluctant to take leave right now, more will be willing to take time off as the economy improves. Kaye also says that progressive employers who want to keep talented workers will make it easy for their employees to do so.

Kaye advises workers who intend to take family or medical leave to plan for their departure as far in advance as possible. In preparation for his absence, Williams, who was responsible for the overall creative production of the Website, met with senior management to set up a plan that included dividing his duties among other staff members. While he was away, he would call in about once a week to see

how things were progressing. But the positive reports he received were "somewhat discouraging," he says. He began thinking that perhaps he was no longer needed.

But when Williams returned to work, he realized that instead of feeling threatened, he felt empowered. Williams firmly believes that the proof of a good manager is how well employees perform in his or her absence. "There were certain parts of my job I was comfortable letting others handle," he says. "I felt like I had graduated. I wanted to take on new and more responsibilities."

Upon your return to work, Kaye suggests meeting with your employees or co-workers to ask them about what they've learned, the skills and abilities they've developed, and the opportunities they're ready to pursue. Meeting with them serves two purposes: It lets them know they're valued, and it gives you the opportunity to get the information you need to resume your duties.