
The First Week Back

A day-by-day plan for returning after leave or a long break

Good operators don't relaunch a paused project by diving straight back into full speed on day one. They ramp: reconnect, reassess, then re-engage. Coming back to work after parental leave or any long stretch away deserves the same ramp, but most of us skip it and try to be fully caught up by Tuesday. That's how you end up exhausted and behind by Thursday, wondering why the "easy" week felt so hard. This is a five-day plan that treats the return like the ramp it actually is.

What you need: your first week back on the calendar, and permission to not be fully "on" by day one.

The steps

1. **Day 1: reconnect, don't produce.** (Half day if you can swing it) Read what changed, say hello to people, get your tools working again. Don't start anything that needs deep focus yet.
2. **Day 2: reassess the actual list.** (Full day) Go through what's waiting and sort it: urgent, important but not urgent, and honestly stale. Most "urgent" things from week one of your leave resolved themselves without you.
3. **Day 3: pick one real thing and finish it.** (Full day) Not five half-started things. One task, done, to prove to yourself the muscle still works.
4. **Day 4: take the first real meeting.** (Full day) Speak up at least once. The longer you wait to use your voice again, the harder it feels.
5. **Day 5: set the next two weeks' pace.** (Half day) Decide what "normal" looks like for now, not what it looked like before you left. It's allowed to be different for a while.

Your first standup line

What I say in the first standup

"Glad to be back. Catching up on context this week, back to full speed by [date]."

What I'm dropping for now

The one thing I'll finish day 3

Who's covering what at home this week

When it goes sideways

You feel behind by lunch on day one. You are behind, that's not a feeling, it's math. Everyone who's ever taken leave comes back behind. It closes faster than it feels like it will.

Someone hands you five urgent things before you've even sat down. Say "give me till Wednesday to get context" and mean it. Urgent things survive two more days almost every time.

You can't shake the guilt of not being "all the way back" yet. That guilt is the return equivalent of jet lag. It fades with the schedule, not with pushing harder against it.

Nobody expects a plane to hit cruising altitude the second it leaves the runway. Give yourself the same runway.

