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Weddings, Honeymoons, and Milestones: Employer Guidance for Time Off Requests

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For HR leaders and business owners alike, the question is not whether employees will request time off for major life events, but when and how your organization will respond. Weddings, honeymoons, and personal milestones do not fall under FMLA or mandatory leave laws, but how you handle these moments speaks volumes about your culture, legal risk tolerance, and ability to retain top talent.

There's No Legal Right — But There Are Legal Risks

It's true: U.S. employers have no legal obligation under federal or state law to offer "wedding leave." These events are not protected by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), paid sick leave laws, or any other statutory entitlement. But do not mistake a lack of mandate for a lack of risk. Employers who approve or deny time-off requests inconsistently, particularly in ways that appear to impact employees based on gender, race, religion, or other protected characteristics, may face claims under Title VII or state anti-discrimination laws.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) continues to emphasize enforcement around leave and accommodation policies that have a disparate impact. While "wedding leave" is not protected, your process must still comply with anti-discrimination and fair treatment standards.

FMLA and Paid Leave Interaction: Be Clear on What Applies

While weddings and honeymoons typically fall outside the scope of the FMLA, some related events might trigger protected leave. For example:

- Destination wedding involving a serious health condition (e.g., pre-surgical travel): FMLA may apply.
- Caring for a seriously ill spouse during or after a wedding or travel abroad: FMLA may apply.
- Employee illness or complications resulting in an inability to return to work: also potentially protected under FMLA.

Moreover, the DOL recently clarified that when employees receive state or local paid family or medical leave benefits, employers cannot require them to simultaneously use accrued paid time off (PTO). This rule limits an employer's ability to control how leave is structured when overlapping benefits are involved.

Employers must understand the interplay between federal FMLA rights and state/local paid leave programs. Suppose an employee receives paid benefits through a government program (e.g., California PFL, DC Paid Family Leave). In that case, employers must designate FMLA leave when appropriate but may only allow PTO to be used as a supplement if mutually agreed, not mandated.

Build Goodwill Without Losing Control

Your policies should reflect both empathy and operational discipline. A wedding is not a frivolous request — it is a once-in-a-lifetime event that deeply matters to your employee. When employers respond with humanity and structure, it creates loyalty. That does not mean granting every request or disrupting workflow. It means having a clear, written policy that:

- Requires advance notice (e.g., 30–60 days).
- Reserves approval based on business needs.
- Clarifies whether PTO or unpaid leave may be used.
- Avoids any ambiguity about the consequences of overstaying approved leave.

Consider including a “personal leave” clause in your employee handbook to address non-medical, non-FMLA, and non-emergency time off. Your language can be simple and clear: personal leave may be granted at management’s discretion, subject to operational needs.

Watch Out for International Travel

If the honeymoon involves international travel, extra scrutiny is warranted. Confirm the return-to-work date in writing before the employee departs, and clearly communicate that unapproved extensions may be treated as unexcused absences. Lingering COVID-era entry restrictions, visa issues, or logistical complications can cause delays, but those are not excuses for avoiding your leave policies.

Where possible, plan backup support and document expectations in writing to avoid any disputes upon return.

Small Gestures, Big Impact

From a culture-building perspective, do not underestimate the power of a simple “Congratulations!” A card, a team mention, or a verbal note from leadership can make an employee feel valued. Some employers go a step further — offering a “wedding day off” or an extra PTO day. These gestures are optional, but impactful.

Policy Consistency Is Your Best Defense

If your leave policies are outdated, vague, or silent on personal time off, now is the time to revise them. Review and align them with current DOL guidance, FMLA regulations, and your state’s paid leave laws. Train your managers, document every request and response, and apply the same standards to every employee, regardless of role, relationship, or circumstance.

Bottom Line for Employers

Personal milestones matter to your employees and your business. They can create resentment, attrition, or even litigation when handled poorly. When handled well, they can build trust and reinforce culture.

Be fair. Be clear. Be compliant. Be human. And most importantly, be consistent.