The Graceful Exit

Career Development

There are many articles on how to find a job and how to succeed once you're there. But what is the best way to leave your current position? Your exit can be as important as finding your new job.

Throughout your career, always look for new job opportunities. It keeps your interviewing skills up, and you never know how good (or bad) your current job is unless you see what else is out there. Even if everything is going perfectly, things can change overnight. Your company could be sold, or a new boss could want to restructure the team. An 18-month or three-year severance may sound like a lot, but only if you planned to retire in that timeframe. Otherwise, you've got a problem!

An enterprise's leaders are obligated to do what is in the best interest of the company. Likewise, you have an obligation to do what is in your best interest. I remember when I took the general counsel job at Fisher Scientific in New Hampshire. Within two months, I was signing a nondisclosure agreement to evaluate its sale (it was eventually sold to Thermo). We had lived in Denver; my wife was still there, and we hadn't even moved. So when I got the call from MassMutual, I took it. Telling the Fisher CEO that I was leaving after less than a year was a tough conversation, but it was the right decision for me and my family.

It’s always best to look for a job when you have a job. If you’re demoted, or you’re not clicking with your new boss, don’t be precipitous. Heard your new supervisor is the devil? Your critical peers may just be poor performers who don’t like the changes. Also, keep in mind that just as you want to emulate good bosses, bad bosses will provide their own lessons. As often as I received managerial “dos”, I have also learned invaluable “don’ts.”

Optimistic friends may say you’ll have your pick of opportunities but be cautious of this counsel. They may just be trying to make you feel better. My experience is it isn’t as easy as you or they may think. As Sheryl Sandburg said, “Careers aren’t ladders where you only go up, they are jungle gyms.” Sometimes you go up, sometimes you move laterally, and sometimes you move down.

Remember, if you are still in a job, the new employer thinks they are “stealing” someone. If you are “on the beach,” they will always wonder why — regardless of your story. When U S WEST merged with Qwest, most of the U S WEST leadership, myself included, received change in control benefits and left. I remember interviewing at Dunn & Bradstreet for the general counsel position and explained this to the CEO. His response: “Maybe you just aren’t any good.” I sure didn’t have a great retort to that.

Securing a new position while employed has other benefits. If you are still working, you get to pick your references. Would your current team all say great things about you? If you’re doing the right thing — recognizing stars and giving constructive feedback to those who need it — how would your lowest rated employees grade you? When I left U S WEST, I also interviewed for the general counsel job at Coors. It was going great until the end when they talked to one of my ex-direct reports whom I had given a very noncomplimentary performance appraisal. I never knew what he said, but I did not get the job offer. He never would have been on my reference list.

If you’re in control of your reference list, make sure they can say more than “she was great to work with,” “really smart,” or other platitudes. Make sure they have concrete examples of how you have the attributes the company is seeking. Specific examples resonate much more than broad generalities.

So you’ve got the new gig — congratulations! Now what?

Breaking up is hard to do. Do it quickly. Unless specifically requested by your employer, limit your exit to a week or two, tops. Most companies terminate at all levels with no transition. Beyond that, like a dead fish, you begin to smell.

Remember that your coworkers are coworkers — and generally not your personal friends. Of course you cared about them, having shared your lives and interests. But the reality is, when you leave, very few of them will remain in touch. And they will quickly turn their attention and allegiance to new leadership. Don’t be disappointed, they should do this. I would counsel them to do so — their career remains with the enterprise and your authority to assist them there has gone to essentially zero. Provide contact information and be available, but don’t expect a lot of calls. And don’t interfere and stay out of the way.

The best thing you can now dispense to previous coworkers is support, advice, and counsel. This was difficult for me to understand. When I left one general counsel position, I felt I could no longer help my former team. I no longer had the authority to promote them or move them into another position. A colleague gave me sage advice: “Mark, you are thinking about this all wrong. You should not be thinking about how you can use your authority or position to help them, but how you can use

your knowledge and wisdom to counsel them."

If you're leaving a "challenging" environment, as much as you may want to, don't say negative things about your previous employer, boss, or others. Don't even give them personal feedback you think may help them. Your time to raise these issues was when you were working, in a responsible and tactful way. You never know how paths will cross in the future. It is silly to burn bridges just because you may think it will make you feel good. Keep in mind that while you may not have enjoyed working for a particular person or enterprise, the person interviewing you for your next opportunity may have a different view. And they might call your previous supervisor!

Do not be critical of the people changes and other decisions your successor makes. We all make decisions, and often do not reconsider them as the facts change. Your successor is probably doing the right thing. We also all have some matters we should have addressed, and your successor quickly will. Finally, the new leader may have different gaps and needs for their team than you did. Assume that you were not wrong. Nor are they. Stay quiet. Feel good. You both made the correct decisions — hopefully.

Only in extraordinary circumstances should you consider litigating an inappropriate demotion or termination. Do the math. How much are you really likely to collect? A couple of years pay may sound like a lot — but only if you planned to work less than a couple of years. Rest assured any reference from your old boss is "toast," and all you will have to show is a title and years of service. The fact you brought a claim, although it should not be a factor in any employment decision, may still create a challenge. And if you litigated a claim and lost, this is likely public, and any new employer probably will seriously question your judgment. I would.

Take time. It is rare in your life and career that you will have no work responsibilities, meetings, emails, or phone calls. Usually, your new employer wants you to start immediately. They have done a long search; you are the right person, and they want you to start now. But they can wait. I highly recommend taking at least two weeks before you start any new job.

In the new world, most of us will have many different employers. I have been general counsel at four major corporations, worked in five different cities, and at two laws firms. Finding that new job is always important — but so is your exit.

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