

A Graceful Exit - Before You Say, "I Quit"

Exiting a working relationship is an emotional and sensitive experience. It generally occurs over months, not minutes. There is a realization that things are not going to change as you want them to and that YOU need to make the change. For some of us that is a major hurdle. Too often we don't pay attention to the signs of an impending downsizing. For some it happens when a new opportunity is offered and we want to further our career. For yet others it occurs in a fit of anger and frustration. How we act on the decision to leave a job is critical to our professional reputation, our career success and our ability to be comfortable with ourselves in the long term.

A couple of tips in making the decision:

Don't just think about "getting out." Consider what you'll be leaving behind. Remember why you signed on for this job, or with this company, in the first place. No matter how boring or unfulfilling your job has become, you probably took the job for some good reasons. Think about those reasons and whether they're still valid before you commit to leaving.

Never resign until you have a firm commitment from the next employer. The commitment should be in writing and include: the starting date, annual starting salary, bonus information (if any), the work schedule and documentation explaining the benefit package.

Don't Bluff! Pretending to resign to get a counter offer from your current employer ultimately backfires. You may get an initial boost in pay or promotion, but you've proved that you are not committed to the team or organization. This jeopardizes your future advancement as well as working relationships. If a counter offer is made ask yourself, "Why did your employer wait until you resigned before attempting to improve conditions, increase your salary, offer a promotion, etc.?" Too often your reasons for wanting to leave will not be resolved and in a few months you will be looking for a new job again.

Preparing for the event:

People will remember how you leave the job. It can create as much of an impression and affect your reputation as anything else you may have done. Resigning your job can be an emotional situation - sad, angry or joyful - all of which need to be expressed at the appropriate time and place. Consider the overall outcome you want from your resignation conversation. Don't think of this job as your old job, but as your newest reference. Regardless of the reason, resigning is a process, not just a single act. If you are very angry, give yourself some time to consider if resignation is the right thing to do. If you are ecstatic about your new opportunity, try not to gloat.

How much notice is required? Consult your organizations policies and procedures for how much notice you need to give. It should also list who, besides your manager, you will need to talk with, if their will be an exit interview or other formalities. Two weeks is a standard, but many jobs require a month more. Don't be surprised if you are asked to leave the building immediately to avoid taking any confidential or proprietary information.

The letter. Once your commitment to leave is assured, you are ready to begin the resignation process. It is best to resign both verbally and in writing. Prepare a simple business letter for your manager with a copy for Human Resources. Keep one for your file too. Include today's date, your manager's name, title and the facility name. You can be as simple as, "Effective [date], I am resigning my position as [title] in the [department]." Print your name and include your signature. Sign all copies. Don't go into detail about your reasons for leaving in the letter. Putting things in writing at this stage could be counterproductive. Save that for the conversation.

Choose a time to inform your manager when s/he can give you undivided attention and you have 5-10 minutes to talk. Do not just leave the letter on her/his desk, or send it in advance. Give her/him the letter in person.

What to say:

Tell your boss up front that you're leaving.

Consider starting with, "*I offer my resignation effective*" Get right to the point. This shows you are serious about the decision. Give her/him whatever flexibility you can on the exit date. Then hand her/him the letter. Keep this conversation short and to the point - this is a professional, not personal conversation. Stay focused on what is ahead of you and speak positively.

Tell your boss why you're leaving.

We've been taught "never lie," but also you should never hurt someone's feelings. Give an honest reason, such as you "*I have recognized the need to move on with my career and have found a good next step.*" Or, you are "*basically satisfied but have an offer I can't refuse* (e.g., shorter commute, exceptional money, greater responsibilities)" or that you "*need to relocate.*"

You need to keep any negative feelings to yourself. You may need this person or the organization as a reference or you may work with them again in the future. If you're adamant about airing gripes, do it face-to-face and in a constructive manner (something they could do better, not just what is wrong). If you are leaving because of unsatisfactory working conditions or other negative reasons, it is best to just focus on the positive aspects of the new position. You might say, "*Working more independently and supervising others is the next logical step in my career advancement.*"

The key question you need to be able to answer is, "Why are you leaving?" Lots of people want to know. You don't need to air dirty laundry or reveal that you hit the lottery - just be gracious. "*I have an opportunity to move into ...*" or "*It was an offer I could not ignore to further my career.*"

"Where are you going?" This is the most probably next thing that others want to know. It is both a matter of curiosity as well as to ascertain any competitive issues. Consider if it is best to share details of where you will be going or what you will be doing other than in general terms. Regardless of whether you're going to a competitor, or moving to the beach to collect starfish, your employer may be nervous about losing company secrets.

Express appreciation for past training, experiences or relationships. Even if you're really angry or unhappy, find *something* good to say. Who knows, thinking about the good stuff might be good therapy! "*This was a difficult decision for me. I've learned a lot here and I've enjoyed working with you and the entire team. In order for me to keep progressing in my career, I couldn't turn down an opportunity to*"

Close on an "up." (This is the "don't" burn your bridges, part). In hundreds of ways your new job opportunity could turn to dust. You may find yourself working with your current boss/colleagues again in a different organization in the future. So use your last line to keep a connection open. In your final conversation, try something like, "*I hope our paths cross again.*"

Maintain your Connections:

Being in limbo is the awkward time between resigning and actually leaving. Some organizations require a minimum of two weeks notice, other need more. But in some cases, where there is sensitive information, you may need to be ready to walk out the door when you announce your resignation. Think about the pride you take in your work and what needs to be finished or documented. Give yourself and your employer appropriate time to make ~~this transition.~~

When your manager is off-site...

Many of us no longer work face-to-face with our managers. If you are geographically apart from your manager and there is no option to have this conversation in person, here are some alternatives:

- Schedule a phone call appointment with your manager. Let her/him know it is very important and effects work completion.
- Get to the point quickly saying that you would have preferred to have this conversation in person. Thank her for her time. Then state your resignation as described above.
- Following the conversation, not before, e-mail your letter of resignation with return receipt request.

Be considerate of your successor. There is no need to punish that person by leaving things in a mess. Prepare a list of what is pending and what needs to be done soon. You will need to be available to answer questions and perhaps even find and orient your replacement.

Remove your personal items unobtrusively over a period of time so that on your last day, you can leave with only your final papers in hand. Make sure you know what you can and cannot take with you (there are serious legal restrictions).

Consider the feelings of your co-workers and customers in losing their working relationships with you. These may range from expressions of goodwill and congratulations to absolute envy. Be courteous, not patronizing, in all conversations about leaving.

Last day activities:

Exit interviews provide you with information regarding your final pay and benefits. As your last day draws near, you may be asked to schedule an exit interview. You will be asked to turn in all access and identification cards, credit cards, keys, tools and company equipment. Exit conversations are also a means for your employer to learn what they need to retain key employees. Be honest about your reasons for leaving but be careful if you feel a need to criticize peers and/or supervisors. Remember, very seldom are "people" problems one-sided.

Thank the people who have given you support. Choose the people who are important to keep in touch with in the future and are going to remain in your network. Be sure you send them your new contact information.

Say good-bye and shake hands with your boss to close this particular professional relationship.

Plan a special activity to end your day with good friends. Look forward to your new adventures and new people you'll be working with in your new job.

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