

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC



Know When to Go

Each year, Elsevier, the publisher of *Nurse Leader*, invites the attendees of the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE) Annual Meeting to submit questions for “The Coaching Forum.” As I reviewed the April 2010 entries, I was struck by a common theme: how do we know when it’s time to move on?

What a great question! How many of us know leaders who have stayed too long on the job? When you think about those leaders, past or present, what stands out for you? Are they engaging, positive, and solicitous of feedback and ideas other than their own? Do they inspire you, and do you enjoy being around them?

Most likely your answers to those questions are no. So you know how it looks and feels when someone else has stayed too long, but how do you know about yourself? What signs and symptoms should you look for in your own behavior and feelings?

1. You no longer feel congruence between your job and who you really are. Your values and ethics are out of sync with those of your organization or your boss.
2. Your dissatisfaction with your job is negatively affecting the rest of your life.
3. You feel overloaded and burned out.
4. You are more emotional than usual. You cry more often, either on or off the job, or both. You are angry more often, too, either on or off the job, or both.
5. You are working with people you no longer enjoy or respect.
6. You are not learning from your boss.
7. You have less energy than at other times in your life. You believe your health may be at risk, or you simply don’t want to go to work.

Even if you are still emotionally engaged with your job, what are some signals from the outside that it’s time to dust off your résumé?

1. You are no longer invited to meetings and decision-making conversations that used to be routine for you.
2. Your boss is not listening to or respecting your point of view.
3. Your organization, unit, department, or service is no longer sustainable.
4. Your organization or department is undergoing so much belt-tightening that your function may be on the line.

5. Your co-workers or boss are acting differently toward you. They are more distant and their remarks are more circumspect than they have been in the past.

Both lists are filled with symptoms that warrant your attention. However, by themselves, none of these is a sure-fire reason to leave your job. Instead, they are warning signs that call for serious reflection. It may or may not be time for you to move on. Here’s how you can tell if it is:

1. Think carefully about whether you still love what you do and where and how you do it *in this job*. If you were to make a ledger sheet with the pros and cons of this job, what would you put in each column? Do this exercise. What do the completed lists tell you? How long is each list? What weight do you give the entries in each column? For example, if you depend upon your paychecks for your livelihood, how important is it that *this job* provides your income? How likely is it that you will find an equivalent job or better, and what will it cost to obtain such a position? Is it worth it?
2. Assess what can and cannot be altered on your job, either by you or someone else. Assess whether you have done everything in your power to change troubling dynamics that are within your sphere of influence. Be scrupulously honest in your assessment. If you have not acted on your own behalf, why haven’t you? Sometimes we are truly powerless to change our circumstances, but many times we are not. Sometimes we are seduced by being needed on the job, even if we are needed too much. Sometimes we get stuck in our own “isn’t it awful” story. Sometimes we render ourselves helpless when we are not. Sometimes we are convinced of everyone else’s faults without considering our own contributions to our problems.
3. For factors that are outside your control, assess whether they can change, whether they will change, and if so, when change will occur. Consider whether you can live with what is likely to happen and when.

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4. If you are experiencing unsatisfactory relationships with your coworkers or your boss, assess whether these relationships can be repaired. Consider what part of these poor relationships you created yourself. Ask for input from trusted, knowledgeable others if you are not sure that your conclusions are correct.

If you determine that you can and should take action and address what's wrong, plan carefully and do not lead with your emotions. Or, if your list of pros and cons reveals that the best course of action is to stay put, do your best while you are still in your job. Readjust your thoughts and feelings by taking care of yourself and focusing on the pro side of your list. What do you genuinely appreciate about your job? What can you add to your list of pros? Post your list where you can see it and review it regularly.

If, however, you determine that your significant work relationships are damaged beyond repair, that your job dissatis-

fiers are too great and not likely to shift soon enough, or that you cannot exert sufficient influence to instigate the change you desire, it is time to move on.

If it is that time, know that you are in good company if you feel anxious about looking for another position, even if you are well qualified. Move ahead anyway. As Eunice Azzani¹ notes, "If work does not feed you and ignite your soul, it's time to rethink what you're doing. If you can't bring yourself to go to work, don't bring someone else."

Let's say you've made the decision to leave. In addition to the obvious steps involved in looking for another job, what else do you do?

1. Take control. Create your departure plan. Work hard in your present position until the end. Take thoughtful action that respects your relationships with your coworkers, patients, and organization.
2. Consider the legacy you want to leave. Think about how you want to be remembered on this job. Think about what you will see when you look back. What will it take for you feel good about the way in which you leave?

3. Don't burn bridges. Although healthcare consumes a staggeringly large proportion of our national expenditures each year, our community is surprisingly small. It is likely we will meet each other many times throughout our careers.

Remember that your career is yours to manage. Never forget that you have worked hard to earn your place at this table—and the next one, too.

Reference

1. Azzani E. How to Leave a Job with Class Once You Know It's Over. <http://wf.wetfeet.com/Experienced-Hire/On-the-job/Articles/How-to-Leave-a-Job-with-Class-Once-You-Know-It-s-O.aspx>. Accessed July 9, 2010.

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio, a national firm that provides executive coaching, leadership development, and leader-as-coach training to nurse leaders and their teams. She can be reached at cathy@leadershipstudio.com.

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