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Managing an Exit

This is a story about “Bonnie,” a “Coaching Forum” reader who generously offered her experience as a follow-up to my October 2010 column, “Know When to Go.” That column prompted a number of readers to share the journeys they took when they were deciding to leave their positions. Here, Bonnie’s story is disguised to protect her identity. We both hope her experience will benefit readers who leave their positions of their own accord.

Bonnie is a nurse leader who excelled in her institution and in her role for many years. She brought resources to her department, she received recognition for her professional contributions to the field and for the achievements she and her team accomplished. Not long ago, she began to seriously consider her future. After much thought and conversation with her family, she decided that it was time to leave her job. She did not wish to depart the organization altogether, but she did want to make a change that would free her from the time commitments of her position.

Bonnie gave a lot of thought to what would best prepare the organization for her eventual change. She reasoned that telling her boss well ahead of her departure would allow for an orderly transition, so she decided to give 9 months’ notice.

Much to her surprise, Bonnie’s job changed dramatically within minutes of stating her intention to leave. Her boss asked several questions as Bonnie discussed her decision to go, and by the time their meeting came to an end, her responsibilities had been greatly reduced. Bonnie left the meeting feeling she had no say in the changes; in fact, she felt devastated. Her boss’s reaction not only surprised her, but it also left her feeling devalued and dismissed.

No matter what we think about Bonnie’s timing and the reaction of her supervisor, her story provides a window into a somewhat common scenario. Although many healthcare organizations publicly honor the accomplishments of their leaders when they depart, events behind closed doors may not always be so positive. Unfortunately, Bonnie’s experience vividly illustrates that we may need to prepare for a potentially abrupt transition when we decide it’s time to go.

Those who hold the leadership and managerial reigns in healthcare must ensure that the institution does its work in the highest quality, most efficient, and cost-effective manner. They are there to ensure that the “trains run on time.” When a leader or manager opts out of the place she occupies in the system, she sends a signal that the job for which she has been responsible must now be managed differently. No matter how deftly (or poorly) a supervisor handles this information, the leader needs to understand that the boss is going to move ahead as he or she sees fit.

Here are the things to consider when you decide to exit:

1. No matter how your colleagues respond to your decision, **don’t take it personally**—especially if their reactions are disappointing. Some organizations are very skilled at honoring people and what “was,” whereas others are not. Even when organizations excel at recognition, this truism still applies: nature abhors a vacuum. When we vacate our positions, the job needs to be filled. The well-being of the function and its domain becomes the focus of others’ attention. Along with that change in focus come new considerations and sometimes a heavy dose of politics, as well. This reality may take us by surprise. Worse, we may not agree with the directions that others decide to take. Although we can make a case for a different course of action, in the end, we have signaled that we have let go of the reins. When we do that, our voices may be weakened.
2. **Plan for different reactions.** Although the organization may sincerely praise you when you resign, be clear-headed about the possibility that your well-deserved acknowledgment may not be forthcoming in the way you would like. You will be well served to consider different responses to your news, because factors beyond your awareness may come into play immediately. Even if you don’t anticipate exactly what happens, you will have thought through possibilities other than the best-case reply.

3. **Buy time.** If you find yourself in the “give-notice” meeting like Bonnie did and your job is shifted immediately, say you want to sleep on it before you agree to changes that require your consent.
4. **Think carefully about how much notice you provide your employer.** There is no single right answer to this critical question because the answer really does depend on a number of factors. There is one rule of thumb, however: if you think you need to provide a long lead time, consider cutting that time by at least half. Not all organizations will respond to such a lengthy transition as Bonnie’s did, but some will. Bonnie found herself having her responsibilities parceled out within minutes of her announcement. Perhaps her boss’ zeal is unusual, but the organization’s need to adjust to the change is not.
5. Even if things go as planned, realize that as a leader who makes a big investment in your work, **you may experience leaving that work as a significant loss.** Even when our reasons for making a job change are entirely positive and on our own terms, we may still feel the emotional sting of loss. When that happens, we need to be kind to ourselves, understand that these feelings are normal, and give ourselves as much self-care as possible.
6. Before you talk with your boss about your intention, **be clear about what you want as you leave.** Don’t assume that your boss and your organization will know what is best for you. It is up to you to initiate and negotiate the terms of your departure. How will your decision be communicated? Do you want a package? What responsibilities would you like to carry out before you leave? What about training others; is

that a role you want and is that a role the organization wants you to perform?

7. Once you have told your supervisor you are going, **think carefully about what you are going to say** to your peers, direct reports, and so. Remember that in the absence of information, people will still find out you are leaving. In the absence of information you provide or authorize, people will make meaning of your exit anyway. It is human nature: when coworkers don’t have *the* story, they will make up *a* story.
8. Before you resign, **identify who is going to be your confidant during the process.** Select someone with whom you can candidly talk and who will support you no matter what. Is that a spouse, a best friend, a relative, or a community member? When making your choice, be wary of selecting someone inside the organization. Even if you are best friends with this individual, politics and split loyalties could change the dialogue and your relationship down the line.
9. Particularly when a departure is well into the future, *realize that your power may diminish before you go.* This can be very difficult to experience and even more difficult to accept. It may help to remember that you initiated this change, and ultimately, only you control how you will experience it. Even if you become less powerful in your role, you are still powerful as an individual and in the rest of your life. Lean into your own strength, your accomplishments, and the support of others so you can stay confident, no matter what.

As Bonnie thought about her lessons learned, she realized that she had “temporary custody” rather than permanent guardianship over her function. She discovered that it never really was “her” job, even though she loved

and embraced the work completely. For many years, she “owned” her role as fully as possible, but that ownership could not last forever. Neither could her tenure.

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