

## The Globe and Mail

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### Problem Solving: Exit Strategy

# Who's in the loop when it's time to go

By SUSAN PINKER

**Dear Susan:** Is there a right way to leave your job? I have worked in a professional position for 10 years and, although it's been good for me in many ways, I'd like to move on fairly soon. It's not a crisis, but I need a change and am weighing when and how to give my notice.

-- The Quitter

**Dear Quitter:** You have two things going for you. The first is that you're not escaping an aversive environment but angling toward a new experience. And, second, having no particular deadline, you can think long and hard about who you will talk to at your present employer, in what order, and what you will say. Once you have an idea of what's happening next, you can allow the idea of new challenges to infuse your carefully crafted farewell message. In the meantime, don't let anything slip out and stay away from mulling it over with office friends on e-mail.

The idea is to create a leave-taking story that preserves your current relationships and that is reasonably truthful in its broad outlines. No need to spell out every detail. Ideally, the person you report to is the one who should know about your departure first. Whatever your relationship, if he or she hears it on the grapevine, you'll both lose face.

Once that person knows, you can approach other colleagues in person for a private chat that reflects your shared history. For some, this can be time-consuming and agonizing. Two friends who recently changed high-level jobs mentioned spending a long time -- one spent the duration of a six hour transcontinental flight writing a goodbye script for each colleague who mattered to him; the other spent a week preparing his farewell. Only after these face-to-face interactions, should you send out a mass e-mail to the larger work community.

Why not give the same patter to everyone? It's important to consider that mini-upheavals like these prompt other people to question themselves and their own commitments, not just to the employer but to their family and their own personal goals -- not to mention their relationship to you.

Your deliberations may give you the feeling that your leaving is a private matter, but your imminent departure can spread an epidemic of dissatisfaction around the office or leave your managers open to criticism from above. And you never know when you will meet up with these people again. Your goodbye should reflect the likelihood that you

will continue to bump up against your present colleagues -- perhaps sooner than you think.

"Think long term," said one recent transplant of her high-level move. "When I thought about my message, I was thinking about all the times our paths might cross in the future." Indeed, one week into her new job, she found herself on a team with a close relative of a former legal adversary. Good thing she treated everyone with respect when she left, even erstwhile opponents. And don't underestimate the time it takes to transfer accumulated knowledge on your files: Complete the documentation and prepare the ground for the people who will take over from you. If you leave the office or clients in the lurch, your absence will linger like a bad smell. It took her 10 days to wrap things up and she's still dealing with follow-up phone calls and e-mails two weeks into her new job. "If I'd just dropped it in people's laps, they would think differently of me."

There's the rub: Leaving galvanizes people's feelings about loyalty. Don't take off in a way that makes them think you don't have any.

**Dear Susan:** As a director and partner in a marketing firm, I assign work to in-house creative professionals and a growing stable of freelancers. I am hearing rumours that a couple of staff members are feeling underappreciated and underutilized, especially when I contract work out on a big project. How do I keep them happy while maintaining my authority to make creative and management decisions?

--The Buck Stops Here

**Dear Buck:** When it comes to keeping people happy, their search for status and recognition is nothing to sneeze at. It's also a moving target. Economists have shown that happiness depends on what you get used to and how you perceive your position relative to others -- what they call social comparison. So it's no longer enough for people to go to work, do a good job and take home an honest day's pay, as Hal Niedzviecki notes in his book *Hello I'm Special*. They have to feel they're doing better than everyone else. And they expect you to say so.

Humorist H.L. Mencken pegged it when he said that a wealthy man is one who earns \$100 a year more than his wife's sister's husband, and social scientists are now proving the point. When it comes to satisfaction, it's all relative. In a clever study by economists Sara Solnick and David Hemenway, people preferred to be paid \$50,000 a year if other people got \$25,000. They chose that over earning \$100,000 when everyone else got \$250,000, even though, in absolute terms, they'd be earning double.

How is this relevant? Your employees can bring home a good salary and get great benefits, including a gym membership and an office espresso machine, but if they perceive that they're kept in the dark and losing rank or status to outsiders, these perks will lose their power to reward. Their satisfaction is relative to what they perceive you are granting to others.

Of course, not everyone can snag every assignment; nor can they all come out on top.

But if these staffers are any good, you can give them that message by meeting with them regularly instead of relying on rumours for feedback. That's when you assess how they're doing on existing projects, if they're eager for challenging work and if they have any ideas that might add value to the business.

And if they're not performing, you have to give them that message, too, says Louise MacDonald, a managing director with Knightsbridge, a human resources firm. "If he's outsourcing because people are not performing or he can't tell them they're not right for a job, he's a chicken," she said with refreshing candour.

Clearly, it's not a matter of ceding control or offering false kudos, but of communicating so that employees' social comparisons don't fill the vacuum. As Mr. Niedzviecki says, the mantra is: "I'm nobody's flunky. I'm special, and I've been told this my whole life."

You have to decide whether you'll say that, too.

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