

Developing an Exit Strategy: *Closing the Door Gently*

By Gail E. Aldrich

So you've found the perfect new job and now it's time to move on from your current organization. After fantasizing for weeks, months, maybe even years about how you are going to get out, it's time to think about the best way to leave. You may feel like sneaking out the back door or possibly slamming the door (especially in the face of the boss who never appreciated how talented you are), but the best exit strategy in most cases is to close the door gently.

There are several reasons for taking the kinder, gentler approach. First, it truly is a small world. It is almost a certainty that if you are moving to a new position in a related field or industry, you will eventually run into someone from your current employer. The person might be a customer that you are trying to land, or possibly a co-worker, or maybe even a boss at some future point. It is much better to have former colleagues remember you for your many wonderful contributions rather than recall that you left abruptly and they had to pick up the pieces.

Another reason for the softer approach is that it is very likely that you will need references from your current employer either now or at some point in the future. And again, it should be your goal to have them remember your work rather than your departure.

Finally, over the course of my career in human resources and business, I have observed an increase in the number of employees who return to former employers. Maybe the new job doesn't work out quite as well as you thought it would and you return to your former position; or maybe you gain some new skills or experience that qualify you for a

higher-level position in the former organization and you are recruited back and promoted. Whatever the reason for the return, the option of it happening will be greatly influenced by the behaviors you exhibit and your communications during your separation process.

So, how do you handle this transition in the most effective way? I have observed three phases in the exit process:

- Announcing your departure
- Wrapping up your work
- Leaving

How you handle each of these phases is important. Let's explore some actions you might want to consider for each.

The Announcement

First of all, you need to get to your boss as quickly as possible. Hopefully, your decision is not a big surprise to her. You have expressed your concerns and maybe even shared that you are interviewing for other positions. Whatever the state of your relationship with your boss, your objective now is to show her respect and to explain your decision thoughtfully and carefully. Provide information on the why, what, where, and when; and then ask for her assistance in determining the how. If you have been a good employee, expect your boss to try to talk you out of leaving, or perhaps to try and make you feel guilty (how can you do this to me after all I have done for you?). Your boss could get angry, or have a number of other reactions. Be prepared to

keep the conversation on track, and above all remain calm.

It would be a good idea to have a draft letter of resignation with you during this discussion. This document should include specific wording about why you are leaving, and it should be the wording that you would like used in all other announcements of your departure. As quickly as possible, try to move the discussion with your boss to how your resignation is going to be communicated to others. You will undoubtedly have some thoughts - for instance, you might want to tell your team and your assistant within 24 hours. Or your boss might want to tell her boss, colleagues, and the HR department as soon as you leave the office. Clarifying the message and defining the sequence of the announcements is a very important activity and one that is best done in partnership with your boss. Once all the announcements are made, it is time to turn to how to finish up or pass on your unfinished work.

Wrapping Up

Your goal should be to complete or transition all of your outstanding assignments. The first step, like with any project, is to develop a work plan. Share it with your boss and get her agreement that this is what needs to be done.

Getting this work done is going to be difficult. First of all, many of your colleagues are going to be stopping by to let you know how unhappy they are that you are leaving and that they are going to leave, too. Don't ask me why this happens, but it does, and in the vast majority of cases they stay right where they are. Keep on message about why you are leaving, wish them well, and get back to work.

Next, you are understandably more excited about your new job than the work that is in front of you. You are probably getting calls from the new boss and colleagues. Again, be positive, but finish the

work you have committed to complete and limit the distractions from the new employer.

Some items to think about during the wrap-up phase include: providing performance updates for all those who work for you (verbally and/or in writing); cleaning out and organizing all files to be left behind; documenting the status of your plans and budgets; and creating a major milestone/schedule chart which might be used by your replacement. By the way, whether your replacement is named before you depart or many months after you leave, make it clear that you would be happy to help this person, and be as generous with your time as possible. You want this person to be successful. Remember, no matter how good you have been at your job and no matter how well you have documented all your decisions and activities, there will come a time after your departure when it will be very easy to blame you for something that goes wrong - it's just human nature. Since you will not be there to defend yourself, the best strategy for protecting your reputation may be maintaining a positive, helpful relationship with your replacement. She will be more inclined to set the record straight on your behalf if you have supported her in acclimating to the new role.

Also during this phase, spend time with the HR department. Most organizations have an exit process and you need to know what is expected of you and what you can expect of the organization. Make sure you understand all the benefits issues that need to be addressed. Ask to look at your personnel file; if possible, get your boss to write a letter of reference for you and make sure a copy is in the file. Understand the company procedures for doing reference checks, including what information will be released and under what circumstances. Many HR departments perform exit interviews on your last day of employment. If this is the case, ask if you can see the questions in advance. Keep your comments honest, constructive, and focused. This is not the time to bring up every grievance you ever had during your employment, but rather an

opportunity to provide some ideas on what works and what could be improved within the organization.

Once you complete your work plan and have scoped out how to work with HR on your departure, the time is approaching to really leave.

Leaving

Make sure you save enough time as your final date draws near to meet with the people you have valued at the company. Schedule time and meet with those who have mentored you and those you have admired. Thank them, tell them how much you have enjoyed working with them, and give them your new contact information. Hopefully, these individuals will be a part of your professional network going forward, but it will be up to you to make it happen.

There may or may not be events to mark your departure. Some companies sponsor large department events; others encourage smaller events with the individual team; and still others discourage any kind of company event out of

concern that it sends the wrong message (why are we celebrating the work of someone who is leaving?) But it is likely that you will have one or more formal or informal opportunities to be honored for your contributions and congratulated on your move. Beyond staying sober during these events, my next best advice is to be gracious. Avoid the temptation to take pot shots at the company or individuals who may have made your life miserable for the last several years. Be prepared with some remarks, use humor, and be sincere - this is not the time for sarcasm or bitterness.

As you get ready to finally leave the premises, do "a Mary Tyler Moore." For those of you too young to remember the show, I am referring to the sitcom's last episode. Mary is leaving the TV studio where she has been employed, which has been shut down. She picks up her few remaining personal items, walks to the door, turns and looks fondly around at the place she has spent so much of her career, shuts off the lights, and then very gently closes the door. It's a good, professional way to leave, and over the long term you will be very happy you made the effort to do it right.

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