

When you quit a job, don't slam the door on the way out

Jeff Buckstein

Globe & Mail

Published on Tuesday, May. 11, 2010

It took about six months for Jennifer Watson to finally decide to quit her job in January as marketing director of a firm involved in employee benefits, and start her own communications business.

Ms. Watson, who lives in Mississauga, was equally careful to plan how she would make her exit: When she walked out the door, she wanted to make sure she wouldn't be slamming it shut behind her.

"I was at a fairly senior level in the organization and had a large team, so I needed to make sure that I maintained good relationships. My boss [who] hired me 10 years earlier, was the person I had reported to throughout. So I had to make sure I was doing the right thing for her, for my team and the organization overall," she says.

So Ms. Watson asked for a private meeting with her boss to deliver the news. She stressed that the decision had to do with her own career aspirations, and not her employer. She wrote a formal resignation letter, providing a date of departure and thanking her boss for contributions she had made to Ms. Watson's career growth. And she gave three weeks notice so the firm would have time to adjust, along with a suggested transition plan and a willingness to answer any questions that might arise after that.

The result: The door is still open for a future relationship and references, Ms. Watson says.

Ms. Watson made some smart moves in how she quit her job, the experts say. As the economy improves, a growing number of workers are planning to move to a new job, studies show. Many of them are feeling disgruntled: After the last year and a half of shouldering excessive workloads, seeing how their companies handled painful layoffs, and watching projects shelved and promotions quashed, more than ever, many workers may be tempted to stick it to the boss on the way out.

That might offer a moment of satisfaction, but would not be a smart long-term career move, experts say.

"Don't burn bridges, even with the people whose bridges you're looking forward to burning," warns Jamie Gruman, a professor of organizational behaviour at the University of Guelph.

"It's a small world and anyone who works in any industry knows you come across the same people over and over. You want them to remember that you were honourable and respectful. Your reputation is all you ever have."

How to handle a departure wisely? Here are some strategies to follow to leave on the best terms – and moves to avoid so that they don't come back to haunt you.

Talk to your supervisor first

You may be tempted to blab your news to your cubicle mate or send out a farewell e-mail to the entire department – but the first person who needs to know about your resignation is your immediate boss, the pros say. Under no conditions should the manager ever get that news via the grapevine.

Do it in person

You might be tempted to send an e-mail or leave a voice-mail message, but announcing you are leaving needs to be done in person. "It's a sign of respect. Face-to-face is the way to do it," Dr. Gruman says.

That's something younger workers, so accustomed to communicating through technology, should pay particular attention to, says Giselle Kovary, co-managing director and founder of n-gen People Performance Inc. in Toronto.

"It is absolutely a word of caution for younger generations that if they're looking to do any kind of serious communications – certainly with respect to ending employment – that should be done face-to-face," she says.

Make it business-like

Keep your announcement formal and the information factual, the experts say. The same goes for a resignation letter, which you should hand to the boss during your meeting. It should be short and sweet, outlining the last date of work and thanking your employer.

The letter needs to be neutral because any statement can be twisted out of context, says Ian Cook, director of research and learning at the B.C. Human Resources Management Association in Vancouver.

"You don't know where it's going to go, how it's going to be interpreted, and when it might come back at you, so the best is to say as little as possible and keep it as straight as possible, and just leave it there," he adds.

Don't air dirty laundry

This is not a time to vent grievances. "Make sure that, under no circumstances, do you badmouth your organization, your company or your managers," stresses Barbara Jaworski, chief executive officer of the Workplace Institute Inc. in Toronto.

Don't air other peoples' dirty laundry or get caught up in personal vendettas. Nor should you betray anybody's confidence as you head out the door, the pros say.

"Talk about the fact you're leaving for new growth opportunities for yourself," Ms. Jaworski suggests.

Make it easy on them

How much notice you give depends on factors such as your employment contract; standard practice (it's generally acceptable to provide at least two weeks notice), and when you're expected to start your new job.

But how you perform in the time before you leave can also affect your reputation. It's best to give as much advance notice as you reasonably can to help smooth the transition, work as hard as you normally would, keep engaging the troops, complete outstanding work and maybe help to train your replacement.

"I would recommend having a really good conversation with the manager saying, 'I'm here till this time. I'd like you to be very specific on what you expect me to have completed by that point.' It's best to have that in writing because verbal stuff can get misinterpreted," Mr. Cook suggests.

Making yourself available for any questions once you've left can also leave a sweet taste in a former employer's mouth. But be careful, Dr. Gruman warns: If you move to a competitor and old company contacts are in touch, "that could be construed very negatively," he says.

Weigh exit interviews

Many employers conduct exit interviews with departing employees to gain feedback that they can put to future use.

"It's easy to give an interview if you're truly leaving for new professional opportunities," Ms. Jaworski says. But if you're leaving on an unhappy note, "I would not advise people to give a negative review of their organization, because they may very well need to get a reference from that organization for future jobs," she says.

No matter how you're feeling, under all circumstances during an exit interview, "you avoid bitching. You avoid complaining. Avoid just airing your dirty laundry. Avoid needlessly casting people in a negative light. Try to be constructive, and offer the organization information and insights that may help them to improve their operation in the future," Dr. Gruman says.

"There's absolutely nothing to be gained from venting," Mr. Cook adds.

Nor should you respond in kind if a manager gets personal or accusatory. "Definitely don't engage back. You've just got to stay calm and (say) 'my understanding of this interview is that it

was about you gathering information for me that helps the organization. Your tone and style seems to be more about telling me what you think of my decision. If we're going to have a conversation where I get to give feedback to the organization, I'll carry on. (But) if the conversation keeps going this way, this meeting's over," Mr. Cook suggests.

Some larger organizations hire outside third parties to conduct exit interviews. That can tempt disgruntled employees to speak more freely, especially if they figure their comments will be anonymous. Even then, it's best to keep the tone and content professional, the experts say.

An honest, acceptable explanation about a sour interpersonal relationship might go something like: "I didn't feel like I had a trusting relationship with my manager, and didn't feel that I was getting the kind of support and input and growth that I was looking for. The management relationship is important to me, and important to my career, so it wasn't working for me," Mr. Cook suggests. "That's a fair thing to say.

Maintain your discretion

Even once you're gone, it pays to continue to be discreet about your old employer. "When you go to a new company, you don't want to develop a reputation for being cowardly, you don't want to develop a reputation for being underhanded or weak, or for talking behind peoples' backs," Dr. Gruman warns.