

When to Leave a Job

By John Hadley



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Last year “Joe” wrote to me asking whether it was time to think about looking for a new job. He hadn’t been there all that long, but found that the environment and culture weren’t a good fit, and felt there wasn’t much chance of finding mentorship there.

Joe considered talking to his boss, but worried that if he didn’t already have a backup plan in place, that could open a can of worms. Still, he wanted to feel he had given things an honest chance before bailing out. And if he did decide to leave, he wanted to make a graceful exit, since he might run into some of his co-workers again further along in his career.

We all reach crisis points in our careers, or in individual jobs. I can recall one time when my own operation was reorganized without my input, and I literally blew up at my boss about it. Fortunately for me, rather than getting angry, he allowed me to let off steam, then patiently explained his reasoning. I went on to thrive under the new organization.

Whenever we face a number of intersecting issues like Joe did, it helps to first consider each one separately.

1. Fit to Company Environment and Culture

Unfortunately, many job seekers get so wrapped up in evaluating and selling themselves for the job that they forget to spend much time observing and weighing the company culture and work environment. This is one of the most critical factors in any job! I’ve known several people who quit their jobs within a few weeks because the jobs weren’t a good fit for them.

It is important to get very specific as to what exactly it is about the environment and culture that is or isn’t a fit. How much of what doesn’t work for you permeates the company as a whole vs. that specific operation? If you are able to shift roles within the department, or move to a new department, will that change things for the better?

2. Seeking a Mentor

This is something you can explore carefully with your boss, but don’t stop there.

Mentorship can come from many different places, in a variety of ways. It can be formal or informal. A mentor doesn’t have to be someone with many years of experience, in your unit, one of your superiors, or even a current employee of your company. You can get mentorship on different aspects of business and personal development from different quarters.

There may be someone in your operation who has only a few years of experience, but is an incredibly good communicator. Your boss may have great insight into how the company operates and who the movers and shakers are that you should get to know. Someone you went to school with and is at a more senior level in another company may be able to serve as the mentor you seek on your required areas of expertise.

Some people go as far as to seek out specific people in their lives to serve as a form a board of directors, meeting with them on a regular basis to share what’s happening in their business or career.



3. Is it time to look for a new job?

In Joe's case, this issue shouldn't even be broached until the first two are thoroughly examined, since those were his primary drivers for wanting to make a move. Even if the answer reflects that it might be time to make a move, a career discussion with your boss is always good idea.

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by having such a discussion, if you go about it the right way. Even in the first few months at a new job, you should have several career discussions. You should have sat down with your boss in your first days on the job to talk about expectations, the most critical accomplishments he or she would want to see from you over the next six months to a year, and particularly what outstanding performance would look like.

The discussion shouldn't be a gripe session—that requires a history of good discussions before it can be productive. You should instead focus on:

- What you would like to see happen over the coming months and years, and especially what your boss would like to see happen over that period.
- The biggest challenges your boss, your unit, and you in your role face, and how you could help to solve those.
- What projects you could get involved with that would help you develop in your role, and move forward toward your longer-term goals.
- (In Joe's case) Suggestions as to how you can find effective mentorship.

Don't give up after just one meeting. Careers are long-term, and so is career development. If you don't make much progress in the first meeting, reflect on how you conducted that meeting, and what you might do differently to achieve a better result. Have informational meetings with co-workers, peers and people you come in contact with in other departments to get really familiar with the company's operations and challenges.

In Joe's case, these meetings would give a lot of material for reflection on whether or not he needs to think about making a move to a new job, a different operation or a different company.

Just by having these meetings, you will have demonstrated that you are really serious about your career, and about making the most of your role there.

4. If your decision is to leave, how will you do so gracefully?

This is a really important question. In my career, I have many times ended up working again with people from past operations or companies. Some of those were peers who became my bosses, and others were superiors who became my peers. You can either walk into a new job or company with a strong reputation, or step into a hole you must dig out of, depending on how you left that prior job. And sometimes you will never know about a negative impact, because it caused you not to receive an offer in the first place.

The key is to show that you are serious about making an active contribution in your job, even up until your last day on the job. I remember being the last person to leave the office in my final corporate job—staying late to clean up my files so that they would be as straightforward as possible for my successors.

In Joe's case, it is critical that he look like he has given the job a serious try. It shouldn't look like he just started and gave up, almost leaving on a whim. He can accomplish this just by taking the actions I laid out in steps 1 through 3 above. These may change his mind about whether he really needs and wants to leave, but if not, they will show his boss and others that he really did take the situation seriously, and he can feel good about making a graceful exit. ●

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