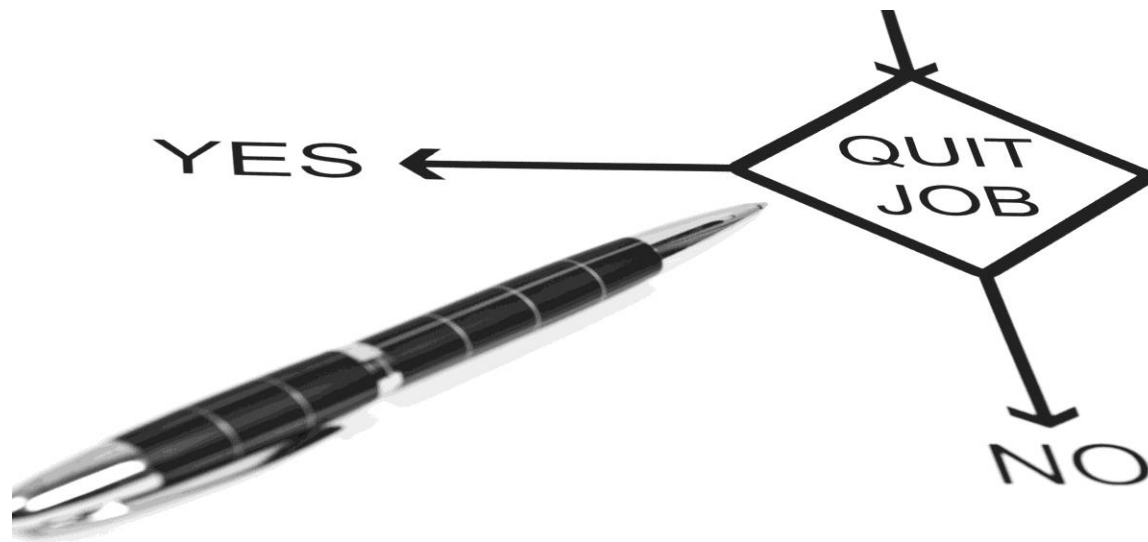




Reasons to Quit Your Leadership Job: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene. A meeting with an executive coaching client after a month-long break due to our respective vacations. After the typical exchange of pleasantries and a few photos, we get down to business.

He fills me in on a sweeping array of changes that are coming down the pike for his business, several dictated by corporate decision makers and the remainder under

his direction. We discuss the challenges he sees ahead in terms of leading his people, the services and products they deliver, and their customers. Next, we migrate into exploring his commitment to putting leaders around him who can support and develop others as well as the cultural seeds he wants to sow. His earnestness is compelling.

Then he surprises me.

"Your job," he instructs me, "is to keep me focused on the right — and the wrong — reasons to leave a job."

Really? I'm hooked.

Dangling on a Line.

The right (and wrong) reasons to leave a job? Not a question I've taken on as a direct inquiry in the past. I've walked alongside plenty of clients as they experience professional highs and lows - better and worse fits with their role, performance expectations, and bosses. And yes, I've watched some either fail or opt out along the way. But his directness, and the binary nature of the distinction (right versus wrong), startles me. I'm much more used to working in shades of gray.

"Let's play," I counter. "A few reasons come immediately to mind. But if you're game, I'd like to use this as a topic for a new article. What do you think?"

"Sure," he responds. "So what do you have for me?"

Shooting from the Hip/Gut.

With no time for deeper reflection, I'm still forming the words around these insights as I offer them to my client. "Here are a couple of wrong reasons to leave that come to mind: first, a fear of failure. Second, to outrun bad performance, either through shame or as an attempt to cover it up. And a right reason: after careful

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consideration, something else is beckoning you more strongly than what you're doing."

He shakes his head up and down slowly, contemplating my offering. "What about not liking the people you work for? Where does that fall?" We both sit and muse over that one. I promise to do some more thinking and perhaps some research, and then get back to him.

I've done a bit of digging into related literature since that conversation. What follows is an exploration of thought work by a couple of other pundits plus some further reflections of my own. And, of course, I look forward to hearing from those of you who read this and want to weigh in on my client's question.

It's a juicy one, isn't it?

And the Research Says.

Forbes printed an article on this very topic a year ago: ["Five Really Good Reasons to Quit Your Job."](#) Briefly, the reasons cited by the author are:

- Your job is affecting your health or causing extreme stress
- There's nowhere to advance
- Your job isn't letting you grow your skills
- You're living with chronic uncertainty
- You've mentally checked out

As far as I can tell, the article addresses employees of all kinds, not just leaders. So as I read the author's guidance, I found myself assessing its applicability to leaders. While reasons #1 and #5 are worthy considerations, reasons #2-4 seem more debatable when you are in a leadership position. For a sampling of my rationale, read on.

First, once you're in a top job in your organization or you've ascended as far as you personally aspire to go, advancement (reason #2) ceases to be a compelling motivator. For leaders who fall in this category, there can be tremendous value to staying put despite having "maxed out" your career ladder. Motivation can shift to other meaningful drives like generativity (using your wisdom and experience to benefit others) and mastery (challenging yourself to become a peak performer). When I used to run corporate succession planning processes, we called leaders like this "well placed." They performed well in their

current leadership roles, yet didn't possess either the stretch or the desire to be promoted to a higher level. Well-placed leaders function as the backbone of an organization.

Second, I have yet to meet a leader whose job doesn't allow for skill growth of some kind (reason #3), even in long-term placements.

Note the operative word in the author's description: she suggests you should consider leaving if your job isn't "letting" you grow your skills. She doesn't state that you should leave if you're not *interested* in growing your skills in ways that the role may require. Thus, while I feel every leadership role will "let" the leader in it

grow his skills, some leaders don't accept the invitation, or even the need, to grow (a refusal that may lead us back to reason #5).

Last, I don't see chronic uncertainty (reason #4) as a reason to flee a leadership job to "save yourself," as the author puts it. Rather, it's a reason to pick up the mantle of leadership and either address the root causes behind the chronic uncertainty or ameliorate the impact on your people.

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Another List. Jack and Suzy Welch recently published a [Linked-In article](#) on this general topic as well (which I guess puts me in good company). They present the following questions to ponder:

- Do you want to go to work every morning?
- Do you enjoy spending time with your coworkers or do they bug the living daylights out of you?
- Does the company help you fulfill your personal mission?
- Can you picture yourself at your company in a year?

I found this list more compelling, yet I still puzzled over the degree of relevance for leaders. While I'm a huge fan of following your passion (reason #1), ensuring

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alignment with personal mission and values (reason #3) and creating personal visions (reason # 4), the list feels completely self serving.

As this coaching client explained in a follow-up conversation about the difference in answering his question as a leader versus answering it as a non-leader, "Ceasing to care is a lot easier without responsibilities to

others." I likened it to the decision-making an unhappily married couple may struggle through if they consider divorcing. While divorce is a significant life decision either way, the order of magnitude is heightened when that couple "leads" a family unit that contains children.

My List. In short, while those authors (and others I haven't referenced here) offer great practical guidance about when to leave your job as an intentional act, the decision to do so should be fundamentally different when you are a leader. There's more at stake - for you as well as for the people and organization that you serve.

So here's my best stab at a few right reasons to leave a leadership job:

- **You have accomplished what you went there to do and are passing the baton to a competent "handoff leader."** This reason may seem like a no-brainer; in reality, it's anything but. A deeply felt commitment to leaving an organization in a better place than you found it is one of the strongest distinguishing factors among the best leaders I know. While those leaders may feel the tug of personal ambition, fatigue, or even boredom periodically, they stay and work through it when others would go.

Why do they stay? Because they are waiting until they can walk away with their heads held high, taking satisfaction in having created the impact they envisioned,

and leaving a capable successor behind... and usually a bevy of loyal followers.

- **You are standing in the Light, not the Shadow.** Similar to my initial answer to the client who prompted this article, the second right reason for leaving emanates from a healthy level of self-awareness and reflection, rather than fear or even self deception. You've done the hard work of shining a light on the factors that might lead you to leave, what those factors have to say about your character and values, and whether you are comfortable with that potential narrative. If you do quit, you'll be called upon to tell the story hundreds of times anyway, so you may as well spend some time beforehand making sure you can tell it with peace of mind and heart.

In addition, you bring trusted others into that discovery process so that they can help you test your reasoning, too. In my experience, if you only do a superficial examination— potentially leaving deeper stuff in the shadows – there's a pretty decent chance you're going to end up replacing that leadership role and workplace with another version of the same, despite your best efforts (a form of what we shrinkers would call recapitulation").

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- **As an act of deep self (and other) care.** In a slight revision of factor #1 from the *Forbes* article, this right reason kicks in if your job is negatively affecting your mental or physical health in ways that *cannot be mitigated*. As I stated in [my last article](#),

most leadership jobs are stressful – chronically so. Although many leaders have high degrees of resilience, they may also benefit from stress relief practices. If those practices and other attempts to lessen the effects of the stress fail to bring relief, a decision to leave is well justified - both for their own and others' well-being. If they're suffering, those around them likely are as well.

- **You've hit the retirement stage...and it's time to get out of the way.** I added this factor a bit tentatively at first but then I began thinking of several past clients who struggled mightily to transition out of a leadership role and into the retirement phase of their professional lives. At a certain point, you've earned the right to hang up your spurs and discover other ways to be happy. (Plus other leaders deserve their turn riding that bucking bronco you used to call your job.) Your inner sense of having reached this inflection point may emerge based on

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actual age...or your mindset. We all know of people who have "retired in place." Don't let that be you.

Making this decision may very well require you to face some fears about how to still feel challenged, useful, and relevant. Do it anyway.

The Question that Launched a Thousand Words.

Now back to the leader who launched this article. You may remember that he asked if working for people you didn't like was a right (or wrong) reason to leave a job. I owe him an answer, so here it is: *it depends*.

Playing with the most relevant factors among those I've outlined above, here are a few additional questions I'd offer to him (and others in similar situations):

- How much of your vision for the impact you hoped to have on your people and your organization has been fulfilled? If you left now, would you feel proud of what you've accomplished? And do you have a ready successor? If your answers to those questions don't satisfy you, would continuing to work on getting to the point where your answers do satisfy you be a sufficient motivation to compensate for the added stress of working for people you don't like?

- What personal core values and beliefs are lined up on the side of staying versus leaving? Try out both versions of the story (the "stay" and the "go") as if you were narrating it. Share those narratives with several trusted advisors. As you do so, really tune in to how it feels to tell each rendition. Notice where you falter and where you feel strong. Ask your advisors to notice the same. What additional insights do you gain by doing this?

Also, be alert for any ways in which dislike of the people you work for may prevent you from staying in the light and honestly assessing your situation, the leadership that is required, and what you have (and don't have) to give.

- Finally, how are you fueling yourself to offset the increased stressfulness of the situation through which you're now leading? What acts of self-care and connection with others might need to find their way into your regular practices? And what signs of personal wear & tear should you be alert to as signals that you've reached an outer boundary, a limit, beyond which you will not go?

To my client: work through those exercises and then we'll talk. I look forward to it. And thanks for letting me bring a few hundred of my closest Linked-In friends along for the ride.



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