How to Resign with Style

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Accepting a new job can send your heart soaring with joy. But joy can turn to panic as you visualize yourself going into your boss's office to announce your resignation. You might feel guilty or fearful that they'll try to keep you by making a counteroffer. Your spirits may sink as you think about what you'll say.

First, A Bit of Homework

Before you spend a lot of time stressing about resigning, a word of caution: Don't plan your takeoff until you've prepared your landing. First, make sure you have an offer in writing. Verbal offers aren't binding. Also make sure the written offer lists a definitive start date. After all, even written offers can be withdrawn. Even if you have the written offer and the starting date in your pocket, you may still want to wait a bit to resign until after your new employer finishes any testing and background checks and you know you've passed with flying colors.

Before you resign, be sure that you have carefully examined your motives for leaving. Will announcing your departure spur a flurry of activity to solve ongoing problems? If so, would you stay? Are you leaving just for a better compensation package? If you're changing jobs for a pay raise only, be aware that you may get a counteroffer from your current employer. Keep in mind that there may be others affected by your indecision. Hell hath no fury like a recruiter scorned.

Taking the Plunge

Even if you're ready to make the move, are you prepared to break the news to your boss? This is where many people turn soft. Will I be pressured to stay? Escorted out of the building? Will somebody be appointed to watch over me as I clean out my desk? The latter situation isn't unusual, especially when the person resigning has access to critical information and is moving to a competitor.

Stress around resigning also comes from other sources. For most of us, resigning triggers a sort of parent-child interaction, where we experience feelings of guilt, fear and sometimes even rebelliousness. Don't make a resignation speech that sounds like, "You didn't give me what I wanted before, so now I'll show you." This is teenager talk and it's not productive. Think: "adult to adult, business to business."

Rehearse. Prepare a short statement to open the discussion while you hand over an equally short letter of resignation. "I've accepted an offer for a new position," you

might say, proffering the letter. “When you have a moment, I’d like to discuss the transition of my responsibilities so nothing is left undone.” There. Breathe out and schedule the real meeting.

When you write your letter of resignation, keep it short, complimentary and focused on your long-term goals. Whether you’re a contractor or permanent employee, be sure you include a timetable for turning your work over in a professional manner. Don’t be arrogant. Your letter might say something like, “I’ve enjoyed my time here a lot and I’ve been presented with an opportunity that I’m sure you’ll be excited about for me. I feel I can comfortably wind up my projects or hand them over as you would like in X weeks. I want you to know how much I’ve enjoyed working with you and I hope as the months and years go by, we’ll have the opportunity to work together again.”

Counteroffer Challenges

But what if your boss launches a counteroffer rally or encourages you to bare your soul about why you’re leaving? Should you swallow the bait?

While you might answer “maybe” to the first question, the answer to the second is absolutely “no.” Avoid saying or doing anything that will damage your relationship with your boss or co-workers. Although it may be useful to give real feedback in an exit interview, remember that life is too short and the world is too small. Be unfailingly gracious and mature.

Counteroffers are often just about money and that’s usually not enough to make a long-term fit. I’ve rarely seen counteroffers work over the long term. The original problems remain unresolved and you end up back in the job market within six months. Still, give any counteroffer serious consideration. But don’t accept it unless it maximizes your employability a year or two down the line. If you do accept a counteroffer, get it in writing, especially if it’s changing fundamental conditions of your employment.

Conclusion

If you’re on the other side of the desk, is there anything you can do to keep a valued employee from resigning? The best retention strategy is not to let things get to this point. Be sure your management process includes a steady flow of communication and career reviews that allow for sustained growth. After all, if you’re not giving your people a chance to pursue their aspirations, they’ll find somebody who will.