

When Should You Quit?

By J. Tom Whetstone, DPhil

If you have never considered quitting your job (without another offer in sight), either you are brand new, have a rather flabby moral compass, or are magnificently and unusually blessed. Most jobs, regardless of the field, can be frustrating and tiresome from time-to-time, even when one is content within one's true calling. Bosses, co-workers, subordinates, customers, suppliers, and government regulators can be stumbling blocks and infuriating, at least occasionally, given the fallen world and the sinfulness of man. Sometimes, due to our mistakes or to events beyond our control, our plans and programs can disappoint, even fail. One may even be asked to do something he deems unethical. But don't think too quickly about quitting.

Winston Churchill, a leader who had numerous failures, often disastrous ones, taught that the good leader is one who fails and learns from his failures, continuing at the mission until he finds success. He was not a quitter. However, when is it right to quit?

Robert E. Lee chose to surrender to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox in Spring 1865, even though Marse Robert's men pleaded with him to fight on. Confederate President Jefferson Davis refused to quit, and fled Virginia to join Joe Johnston's Army of Tennessee, which he urged fight on for the Confederate cause. Is there sometimes virtue in quitting?

Hillary Clinton refused to quit her campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination right up to the August 2008 convention, even though Barack Obama had secured the required votes long before. Mitt Romney had long prior abandoned his campaign for the Republican nomination after John McCain built a strong lead. Richard Nixon resigned when threatened with impeachment over Watergate. Bill Clinton, under impeachment proceedings in Congress, refused to resign although to do so would have been considered more honorable by many. The political and social circumstances as well as particulars of cases vary, so deciding to quit or not can be difficult. One's moral compass matters, but in which direction does it point?

This can be an issue for any manager or employee. What should the employee do when asked by his manager to act in a manner contrary to his ethical beliefs, such as to hide potentially damning evidence, or to overestimate the capabilities of the company's products, or to hire someone whom he feels is under qualified? Is the employee caught between the Scylla of quitting and the Carybdis of going along in moral compromise?

Perhaps, but Joanne Ciulla (1991) affirms that the really creative part of ethics is refusing to do either. Instead, develop other alternatives, ones that can enable the organization to meet its objectives in ways that are ethically acceptable. For example, perhaps the employee can persuade the manager that it would be better to "come clean" and move on, or to promote other aspects of one's product, possibly to a different market, or to suggest another, more suitable position for the person the manager wants along with a superior person for the original position.

These alternatives may not always be accepted, but the truly creative and dedicated employee can continue to search for others. He may convince his manager or at least stimulate his manager to be more creative and ethical. If not, and the ethical battle appears lost, then the

employee can reconsider his position. If he resigns, he at least has not done so prematurely or rashly. This can lead to the next question, which also rates careful consideration.

If one quits because of the manager, should one tell the real reason for leaving?

Jeffrey Seglin (2005) tells of a reader who got a call from his son-in-law asking for advice after quitting his position with two weeks' notice. He left because of his supervisor, whom he considered to be a poor manager. When the quitting employee gave notice, his supervisor asked him to meet to offer an evaluation of her, particularly of her management style. The employee was concerned about insulting her and jeopardizing the good will he had built.

The father-in-law advised, "Lie! Tell her she's not the reason you're leaving. Just tell her that you're leaving because of a salary hike and a new opportunity which you find exciting. It is not your responsibility to straighten out that company or that person. Let her superiors figure it out."

Did the father-in-law give the right advice? Seglin answers that he was right to advise his son-in-law to consider his best interests. This is prudent: one may have to depend on a former supervisor for a future job reference. He should take care and avoid engaging in a gripe session. He definitely should not insult her by openly saying, "You're terrible and here's why."

However, that doesn't mean he should lie. If he does, he will leave his former colleagues working for a boss who will continue to think that she is doing okay. Instead, the son-in-law can use that hour with his former boss to offer constructive responses to any questions she might have about her management style.

If he does not answer frankly, the deficient boss might not soon, if ever, learn what she needs to correct. Sometimes a supervisor keeps or even promotes an inadequate manager because he presents no threat to her own position. "Normally, a boob has a boob for a boss," says Angelo Calvello, a principal at a financial firm in Chicago. The "boobs" often become political allies in disguising their mutual incompetence (Sandberg, 2005).

However, it is wise to be very careful in reporting one's supervisor to his superior. The subordinate is not only lower in rank, but he often has incomplete perspective as to what really has been transpiring. This is anecdotal, but revealing nevertheless. In the course of interviewing a young woman in England as to her work experience and values, she described her experience working in a manufacturing facility with other women employees. The supervisor of these women was rumored to be having an affair during work hours with a man who was working elsewhere in the plant. This was affecting morale and productivity, due to the supervisor's absence at critical times and the disruptions due to rampant gossiping. In the interview, the young woman said that she finally decided to report the supervisor and the rumors to the plant manager. Afterwards, the supervisor started to make life miserable for all the workers in her charge. After quitting, the young woman whom I interviewed found out the truth--the supervisor was conducting the affair with the plant manager himself. Reporting the rumor to him did not solve the problem, at least in this case.

Often incompetent managers are retained because the people who hired or promoted them are reluctant to admit they made an error. Sometimes they acted without seeking the advice of more knowledgeable subordinates; acknowledging their error is an affront to their egos. This has been consistent with human weakness ever since the Fall.

But, returning to the young man considering the advice of his father-in-law, if he truly believes some good might come from his sit-down discussion with his boss, he would be right in offering constructive comments and criticisms. He should avoid challenging her too negatively, but rather tactfully focus on things that might result in her rethinking the way she approaches her employees. This would cultivate the possibility, however remote, of planting seeds that lead to improved conditions for the colleagues he leaves behind and for the supervisor's growth as well. Moreover, this is the more ethical approach, although perhaps a supererogatory one requiring courage beyond the call of duty.

You may hope these tough choices will not be forced on you. But it is good to consider such unpleasant decisions objectively, before you find you must choose.

References

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