

When It's Time to Tell the Boss Goodbye
How to Give Notice Professionally While Staying Focused on Your Future
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You made the decision to leave. You put together a competitive resume, circulated it through professional recruiters and online, interviewed with too many potential new employers, and finally found the perfect next job. The offer letter has been signed and the start date agreed upon; now all you need to do is resign. For many, this feels like a moment of disloyalty they dread having to deal with as they face a boss they have worked hard for over this most recent portion of their career. For others this seems like the opportunity to lay it all on the line as they have long dreamed of doing.

What to do?

How does one give notice appropriately while keeping one's eyes firmly focused on the new career choice? This isn't something that is taught in high school, college or even graduate school. Most approach this critical career juncture flying by the seat of their pants, mimicking what they have seen others do incorrectly, and for that reason, they do it wrong too.

Never use this opportunity to "get back at" or "let them know" all that is wrong. It just doesn't matter, and your reference is far too valuable for your future to risk the one-day satisfaction of telling a boss you didn't love, where to go with all the seeming injustices you suffered in his or her employ. Most young professionals will have at least 9 jobs between the ages of 18 and 34; you'll need all of your references as you build your career in today's competitive workplace. Don't blow one of them on a moment of empty satisfaction. As you become more entrenched in your career beyond your 30's, it should be obvious why past employer references are critical in any profession that gets uncomfortably small as you move up into the executive ranks.

Giving your notice of resignation should be a simple, thoughtful and carefully planned event that reduces your stress and focuses on the one and only thing that is really critical: making the transition of your departure as smooth as possible for the employer you are leaving. With that singular focus, you can get done what you must for your old job and leave your old employer in the best position you can while you mentally begin to focus on your new employer.

So what must be considered?

First, remember that giving notice means you are crossing a point of no return. It is almost never a good idea to give notice without a new job first, and, depending on how far up the executive ranks you have gone, you probably shouldn't give notice until an offer letter has been received, reviewed, signed and given back to your new employer. Let's assume that this has been done or that a firm mutual verbal agreement has confirmed your position, salary and start date.

The next question is when to give notice. The answer: immediately, or as soon as possible, after you have tendered an official acceptance of a new offer of employment. There is one big exception: Never do this on a Friday, above all not on Friday afternoon. Would you want your weekend ruined in that manner through the loss of a key top performer? Ideally, it is best to give notice on Monday or Tuesday in the later part of the day.

Remember, also, that no matter how close you are to some of your co-workers, peers, or even subordinates, never tell anyone else about your resignation before you tell the boss. It is your boss's responsibility, and right, to tell the rest of the team or company about your resignation as he or she sees fit. Don't blow a reference or leave a bad impression by ignoring this rule.

Your next important issue is a written letter of resignation. Having seen hundreds of these over my 20

years, I can tell you that less is more. I suggest a simple, four-sentence, two-paragraph letter that offers little in the way of an explanation. It just states the obvious – you are resigning:

Dear Boss,

Please accept this letter as my official notice of resignation. I appreciate the work we have been able to accomplish together at [company name], but I have now made a commitment to another organization and will begin with them in two weeks.

Know that it is my intention to work diligently with you to wrap up as much as possible in the next two weeks to make my resignation as smooth as possible. If you have any suggestions on how we can best accomplish that goal, I hope you will share your thoughts with me, as I am eager to leave on the most positive note possible.

Sincerely,

Two of the biggest simple mistakes job changers make in their letters of resignation are to say in, some form, “I’m sorry for leaving” or “Thank you for the opportunity to work here.” Both should be avoided. Why should you say you are sorry for leaving when your current employers couldn’t do what was necessary to keep you in their employ, however that may have been accomplished? They should be saying they are sorry to YOU, for not doing what they could to keep a key performer. More or less the same thing with “Thank you”— they should be thanking YOU for your good work. Sure, it might be fine to express a verbal thanks, or regret, but never put it in your official resignation letter. It just doesn’t belong there.

But the biggest mistake made in the letter of resignation is too much detail. I have seen resigning employees list the reasons they are leaving, tell the employer where they accepted the new job, why they accepted it, their position, responsibilities, salary and bonus structure. Why would you share this competitive intelligence with a soon-to-be FORMER employer and possible competitor of your new employer? This is confidential information, information that can only be used to emotionally or actually sabotage your new situation. (Yes, I’ve seen it done, once even calling the new boss and telling him all the reasons why he just made a bad hire. Really! Fortunately it didn’t work – the new boss knew a good hire when he saw one.) Or it can be used as a tool for your old employer to make you a counteroffer. If your intention is not really to change jobs, but rather to elicit a counteroffer in order to get a raise from your current boss, then you have not read the research on why this amounts to career suicide. We assume you know better.

After you have crafted a resignation letter, you must give it to the boss. With few exceptions, you should do this in a face-to-face meeting. Thus it is your responsibility to arrange for a meeting, and if you arrange the meeting, it is your responsibility to have an agenda for it. Should the boss want to know what the meeting is about, simply say it is a matter of “personal concern that needs to be addressed confidentially.”

As you walk into the meeting, have your letter of resignation in hand in an envelope. To start the meeting, hand your boss the envelope and say something like:

“Boss, I have made a commitment to join another organization and will begin working with them in two weeks. Please accept this, my letter of resignation. I would ask that you take a minute to read my letter before we discuss together how we can make my transition as smooth as possible.”

Don’t make it a big drama, just quietly insist that it would be best for her to read the letter to start your meeting, and mention that you have an agenda to share after she has read the letter. Bosses won’t always comply, but it’s critical to focus them on the letter before you say or do anything else. I have helped people through this process countless times; it works. Just be politely persistent until the letter is read. Trust me, they know what it says and are going through the first stages of denial by not reading it. That, or they won’t read it as part of a power play. If that is the case, do you need any more confirmation for why you should resign?

Once the letter is read, share with the boss your meeting agenda, which should list 3-8 items that need to be wrapped up in the time of your two-week transition, and your plan to get those done. And yes, except for the most senior executive-level players, two weeks is more than enough notice for most job changers. Your loyalty needs to go to your NEW employer, not the projects or work that remains with your old employer. I can't tell you how often resigning employees get this wrong.

It will not be unusual for your superior to want to stop you at this point and ask the "who, what and why" questions after a dose of what we refer to as "shock and amazement" treatment. Don't let these oft-used ploys allow you to stray from your singular goal of how to make the transition of your two-week notice go as smoothly as possible. If your boss persists in asking those questions, tell him simply something like:

"I know you may be curious about where I am going and why, but it is not my intention to discuss that with you today. My decision is made. I have made a commitment to another organization. If it is really important for you to know where I am going and why, let's talk about it when it is not an emotional issue for us, say a month from now. Today, my goal remains to discuss how to make the transition as smooth as possible."

Ask yourself, Why on the day you resign, and only then, is he so darn interested in what your concerns are, and where you are going and why? A seriously concerned boss would not need a resignation to address the future with a key employee. This isn't some sudden interest in advancing your career, as bosses often make it seem; this is a stalling tactic for them to figure out how to cover their backside with this new problem that has just landed on their desk.

I cannot emphasize this point enough. Once you understand this, you will no longer feel the need to talk about anything else EXCEPT how to make the transition of your two-week notice go as smoothly as possible by addressing the items on your transition list. That is the singular goal of this meeting. Frankly, any further information about where you are going, and why, is simply none of the boss's business at this point. He or she should have asked those questions BEFORE you felt the need to look for a new job, NOT after you have accepted one.

Once you are past this most difficult point, here are a few pointers to help you make your final transition steps easier: First, call a significant other and let him or her know you gave notice and that it went successfully — husband, wife, third-party recruiter or even corporate recruiter that you have been working with to land the new job. It is often beneficial to talk to a welcoming voice after this stressful interaction. Don't talk about your resignation with peers.

Two, make sure you have mailed or emailed a copy of your letter of resignation to your boss's direct supervisor and also to your human resources contact. It gets the ball rolling on wrapping up your employment "officially." You'd be surprised how often the direct supervisor forgets to take this step.

Three, the night after you tender resignation, look around your desk or workspace and take the three or four most emotionally important items home with you. Family photos, award for excellent service to your employer, photos from a memorable company meeting or outing. Just grab them and put them in your briefcase or purse and begin the process of removing yourself from this workspace. Take a few items home every night for the next few days.

Four, make sure that you have ALREADY removed any personal items from your laptop or PC, and have taken home those files in some manner. Also, copies of all your employee reviews, customer letters or testimonials, recommendations — whatever you may want as part of a future job search portfolio — should already be in your possession and off-site. I hope I don't need to remind you that you should only take what is rightfully yours. You don't need anything else, so just leave it behind and do the right thing.

Five, should you be asked to do an exit interview, I recommend politely declining the invitation. Little can really be learned that is helpful for you at this point; they missed their opportunity to make a difference for you. Don't buy into the notion that you could make things better for those who remain. My experience is that exit interviews are seldom used constructively. If you must do an exit interview, be polite, answer the questions in a simple, perfunctory manner with short answers that have little detail, and do not delve into anything controversial. Remember, your answers become part of your permanent employee record.

Finally, focus on legitimately wrapping up your business and/or transferring your projects or responsibilities to your co-workers, replacement or boss as assigned. Even if your boss doesn't give you much direction, at least write it all up and document your work so that it can easily be understood once you are gone. Make sure that you leave a cell phone number where they can call you should something come up that they just cannot understand.

And don't be surprised if your boss persists in asking the "who, what and why" questions. Simply and politely rebuff them and report on your progress in getting things wrapped up. You DON'T need to tell anyone where your career is taking you next. Your boss is human and might be naturally curious, but don't you think that if he or she REALLY had your best interest in mind he or she would have had this interest sooner than the day you resign? Simply focus on that new job, that new career, the excitement of those new job challenges. Sure, one door is closing, but the excitement of the new door opening is what should have your attention on now.

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