

How to Tell if It's Time to Go

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

We all have bad days at work, times when we hate our boss, creatively dry periods that feel as dry, hot, and unnavigable as the Sahara Desert. We look longingly out the window at others who surely are scurrying to a more interesting job than this. We also spend time flipping that old career coin in the air: Should I stay? Should I go? There is often more to this decision than a yep or nope answer. What if I don't find a job right away? How can I ever make this much money somewhere else? My family needs this income!

Confounding issues such as that often cause us to rein in the rebellious dreamer within who stirred things up by gazing longingly at an untraveled horizon. We decide to be grown-ups and just get back to work.

Sometimes that strategy works, and we apply our disciplined hand to the job that may not thrill us but provides certain essentials. Sometimes that urge to go rages in us, but we feel so obligated to stay or we fear the unknown and we keep stomping it down. Guess what? You just THINK you are! If it's really time for you to go, your behaviors show it. Here are some of them:

1. You change from being "On-Time Hal" to "Where's Waldo?" Even though you may have only arrived 15 minutes before the old get-to-work gong rang, now you're slightly late each day. You're also five minutes late for meetings. You no longer show up for that important schmooze fest beforehand where all the decisions are made. You're out the door like a shot at quittin' time. Your sterling attendance record changes. You call in sick every few weeks.
2. You remove yourself from your co-workers. You park at the OTHER end of the lot from the spot you and your pals kind of designated as yours. You no longer go to lunch with them. You either have errands to run or you plead deadlines and eat at your desk. You quit the bowling team. You feel out of the loop and resentful, and it never occurs to you to see yourself as being the reason.
3. You spend lots of time in the bathroom. Okay, you took the *Wall Street Journal* with you like everyone else does, but three times a day? Actually, you sit in the stall, head in hand, dreading the walk back to the cubicle with the walls that close in more each day. At other times you clean your desk way too much or not at all, talk on the phone to friends, or plan unnecessary trips out of town. On a good day, most people are productive about four-and-a-half hours. You're lucky if you get in one or two ripping hours.
4. Your performance begins to slip. You may have always been the guy screaming down the hall from the copy room, hastily bound report in hand, just in time for the important meeting, but at least you got it there. Now your reports are late. You screw up a big project. You quit the United Way Committee. You sit slack-jawed through meetings, contributing little, except those few times you shoot off your mouth and see your boss scowl at you because you were superficial or premature or just plain wrong. You don't cozy up to the boss, and play lousy politics, never doing even the most elementary things.

The saddest thing about these signs is that you generally don't recognize them as the beacons they are, blinking the message at you: "It's time to go!" You don't pay attention to your own behaviors, but you start getting sour about everybody else. Why have your friends deserted you? Why is your boss acting like such a jerk? Why doesn't this company do something that HELPS people instead of robbing them blind?

What you're not looking at is these are the same people, boss and products that excited you for so many years. THEY haven't changed. YOU have. The performance slide happens last, but it's when the organization stops worrying about where your usual vim is and starts getting annoyed by you. The performance slip is, frankly, your engraved request to kick you out of there; in other words, to do what you couldn't do for yourself.

How does this dreadful passage proceed? At first, as I said, because you've been a valuable employee, everyone feels concern. Then, when you treat a work friend haphazardly or make the boss look bad, they start to change their opinion about you. It takes time to reverse a high opinion to a low one, but when it's clear you're no longer on the team, that's when the boss invites you in, closes the door and says, "What's going on here?" If you don't fix it, you've got another few months before the firing machinery clicks to its dreadful close and you're out the door. All told, it takes six months to two years from your profound despair to the slamming door.

Can you reverse it? Absolutely. The question is, will you? Will you renew your heart so you're more happy at _____? Can you find something outside work that gives you enough satisfaction to make those 8 hours of indenturedness tolerable? Can you get education? It's all doable, and it's all up to you. People are happy to change their minds about you, unless you've stepped onto that last slippery slope and glare defiantly at everyone. Whoosh!

It's up to you. Just realize that if you're heading down the hall with the newspaper again, it's not a twitchy colon. It's time to go in other ways.