

What if you get to the top but you hate it. Can you leave?

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

This happens more than you might think. The air is quite different up there. The game is played fast and mean. Your ability to have ethics and integrity is often compromised when you face that dragon with two heads, one named "Shareholders," the other called "Bottom Line." Heck, sometimes you're lucky to even be able to distinguish right from wrong, or to tell the difference between that which will slay you or boost you higher. And, your life is the company.

Some people are invigorated by those challenges; others are horrified.

The way out isn't easy. Most people go this way. They're in the job a year or less when you suddenly see a memo on the bulletin board announcing, with regret, your colleague's resignation and new job in another company, one that sounds remarkably like their position before last year's promotion. You never know if she went on her own or at the company's encouragement. Everybody puts a positive spin on the move.

Some people don't admit the lack of fit, hoping no one will notice. Soon enough, however, you see the notice: "resigned to pursue other interests." Translation: Resigned before he got fired.

A few can go back, maybe not to the same job, but at that level elsewhere in the organization. It meant the performance and relationships was so good previously that all involved participated in the change. You may not see an announcement on this one, other than a mention when the replacement is announced. Many companies have titles that tell you what the move meant: "Supervisor" means this; "Manager" means that. So they correctly fill in the blanks, recognizing the announcement as a face-saving gesture.

Everyone gossips about it for a minute over their jelly doughnuts and coffee before being swirled back into the swift and often frigid waters of organizational life.

It's hard to have compassion when you see these announcements. You haven't been to the mountain your co-worker fled, so you don't understand what's there and what caused the flight back. There's a veil between the top and not top, generally held firmly in place, to the satisfaction of all. It is always awful when the veil is lifted.

The point

If the top isn't where you belong, get another job as quickly as you can. If you don't, it will take between one and two years for the organization to get rid of you. Say whatever you need to save face with others, but be honest with yourself about your aspirations. If you think you can go back to your old job, it's worth a try. Realize it's not that easy to do; your relationships will have to be golden. If you see the moved-down-a-rung announcement, have a heart. Give your co-worker the empathy you would to someone

who's gone through what you haven't experienced. Your outreach will be clumsy, but the person will appreciate your warmth and caring.

As to your own piercing of that top corporate veil, learn as much as you can about it before you make that leap. Have a scheme in mind if you need to find your way back.