

## Will you leave well?

Margaret Beaton 28 October 2012

Tom Stoppard, a British playwright, penned 'Every exit is an entry to somewhere else'. Stoppard's eloquence leads me to ask How well will you leave? whether you are about to step up or let go in a particular phase of your career. I am referring to the challenges, including the pain, of leaving precious people and things behind so you can move on whatever your next destination.

Careers are always in transition whether you are stepping up, side ways or moving on to something completely different. Leaving the most recent phase behind marks a turning point on your path of personal growth. There is a certain pattern you need to understand. There must be an ending before the new beginning, sometimes with a fallow time in between. This is the natural order of things: the leaves fall, the branches become dry and then new shoots emerge, as the cycle starts afresh.

Without an ending there can be no new beginning, so you have to know when and how to leave, to make an end. It means accepting that a chapter of your life will close. And it is best managed by planning for the next chapter to smooth the way and seize control over your destiny.

Leaving involves a kaleidoscope of events and feelings described by William Bridges in his book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. These occur in no predictable pattern and to keep control over your own leaving, you need to learn to recognise and cope with these components of the process. They are the act of *disengaging*—voluntarily or otherwise—from work and relationships that have been important to you. Then there is *dis-identification* that involves breaking with established ties that have helped define who you are. You also go through *disenchantment* as you recognise that what created enjoyment and brought satisfaction in the past no longer holds the same meaning. This is often a signal that heralds the beginning of the transition process. And finally there is *disorientation*, a loss of direction and sense of purpose with no apparent future plan. Disorientation often disrupts your ability to structure time which can feel as if it stretches endlessly through day and night.

We each experience and react to these four elements differently—and not in any given sequence. Each of us has over our lifetime developed our own ways of coping with endings. Some want swift closure and to move rapidly to a new beginning only to recycle back to the ending at a later date in order to make sense of it and to try to clear the way for a truly new beginning. Others linger and stretch out the ending for as long as possible, sometimes to avoid it and sometimes to make sure all future options are available. This sometimes leads to not reading the cues that the time is up and overstaying our welcome. Leaving then ends up on someone else's terms, as we have seen happen to prime ministers and captains of sport and industry.

What's important is that we understand what's happening, take charge and work actively through the process, not allowing ourselves to become its victims.

### Letting go isn't easy

There are four reasons why letting go and leaving well is hard for so many of us. *Firstly*, we confuse the ending with finality. We fear we're 'gone', 'done' and 'finished'. We too readily forget that letting go is the first phase of the transition process and a sine qua non for renewal. *Second*, there's the unexpected loss of identity we feel. 'You' are different and not 'you' any more. This evokes strong emotions that we don't necessarily understand or know how to manage. These can change rapidly; one day its business as usual, then it all disintegrates and we feel lost and disorientated. *Third*, we are not practised in surrendering, and we don't know how to recognise and give in gracefully to feelings of loss. Instead we strive to avoid them, find them difficult to express or are afraid we will

appear weak or foolish. We haven't established rituals for saying farewell to people, places and routines. We feel helpless. *Finally*, we do not sufficiently seek out the support of colleagues who have gone through the similar transitions. We're often in a cone and conspiracy of silence where there is a lack of transparency about how our firm (employer) handles the process. We might remember those who have been poorly or unfairly treated—and fear we are next. Leaving is hard if you're not in control.

The key to being in control is knowledge and preparation. And it's not only up to you to prepare; your firm should too. Those who leave well become ambassadors for their old firm, a topic for the future.

Stoppard's right; every exit is an entry to somewhere else. Have you chosen your exit—and your next entry?

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