

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a light blue dress shirt cuff, firmly gripping a white, modern door handle. The background is a blurred office interior with glass partitions and a window, suggesting a professional setting. The lighting is soft and natural, coming from the window.

HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

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A proven process for exiting gracefully  
and entering your next role confidently

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Advice about how to secure a position at a new company is plentiful, but little has been said about how to leave your current company the right way. How you handle the transition can have an enormous impact on how you are subsequently viewed – not only in your former company, but throughout your industry and beyond. Leave clumsily and you can cause lasting damage to your reputation. Make your exit with forethought and tact, and you can enhance your reputation and your career.

Poorly handled voluntary departures occur with surprising frequency. When it comes to moving from one company to another, otherwise astute executives often make fundamental mistakes that cast a cloud over their leaving. The consequences can range from distasteful to disastrous: hurt feelings, lasting resentment from former colleagues, blame for harming the company, a protracted and painful exit, failure to make the transition as planned, and – worst of all – a reputation for thoughtlessness that can be hard to shake.

No two departures are identical, and executing a graceful exit is a complex and nuanced process that can vary by company, personalities and a host of other factors.

However, based on our experience advising top executives on their careers, as well as a series of in-depth executive interviews we conducted about such transitions, we believe that a successful exit can increase significantly by adhering to these three guidelines:

- Gain **clarity** about the move.
- Make **connections** with the appropriate people.
- Deepen **commitment** to the chosen course of action.

These “three Cs” – clarity, connection, commitment – are practical and nearly simultaneous steps in a dynamic and self-reinforcing process. Clarity about why you are leaving leads to a clear view of the connections you need to make with people who are affected by your move. Making those connections helps engender real commitment to your decision. Deepening that commitment imparts further clarity, and so on, in a virtuous circle.

Some executives, instinctively grasping these principles, conduct themselves accordingly and leave successfully. But there is no reason to rely on instinct – and risk making any of the many mistakes that can ruin an exit – when you can consciously choose clarity, connection, and commitment to guide you through what could otherwise be a messy, unstructured process fraught with peril for your career.

# Gaining clarity

## From the personal to the political

In the course of deciding to accept an offer from a new company, you no doubt weighed the pros and cons of the move, consulted family and confidants, and even thought about how it might unfold at your current company. But there's a difference between happily telling a suitor yes and explaining convincingly and unambiguously to the people you're leaving why you're saying goodbye.

To be able to do so, you must take a hard look at all aspects of your planned move – its motivation, its professional implications, and its likely effect on your current company, colleagues and other parties. These are the four spheres through which the decision ripples outward: the personal, the professional, the practical and the political.

That fourth sphere is rightly called political because it is the realm where a great many people – in effect, different constituencies – are constantly judging you. Although no formal votes are taken or results reported, those judgments can follow you for years to come. And in the age of social media, a prospective employer can easily search LinkedIn and similar sites for mutual acquaintances and conduct informal referencing. “I call it your street reputation,” says Grace Soriano Abad, Head of Global Talent Acquisition for NetApp, a USD\$6bn information storage provider. “It’s easily accessible, and when you’re leaving, you should keep it firmly in mind.”

When it comes to the personal dimension of the decision to leave, “know thyself” is sage advice, but it’s hard to follow. According to a former divisional CEO of a technology company, “Most executives are accustomed

to dealing with ambiguity, but not personal ambiguity.” The mix of personal motives driving most people can be difficult to disentangle or prioritize. You should dig as deeply as you can, examine your possible motives for making the change, weigh their importance, and – most importantly – be prepared to articulate them.

A highly successful expatriate General Manager in a global CPG company accepted an offer to become a divisional CEO in a global industrial company. The new position would take him back to his native country. “I felt I had reached a plateau in my career, and the new job and the money were both better,” he says.

But the most compelling reasons for the move were personal. After ten years as an expatriate, he would not only be able to return to his home country, but also, to be near his aging parents. His children would have the opportunity to get to know their native land as well. On the other hand, there were drawbacks. He and his family would face a lower quality of life back home than they had enjoyed as expatriates, where, as he says, “everything was taken care of.” On the whole, however, the advantages of moving home had outweighed the disadvantages and, combined with higher pay and a more challenging job, had clinched the decision – a difficult and nuanced decision, but one about which he was perfectly clear from a personal standpoint.

That clarity served him well when he told his boss that he intended to leave. His boss said it was impossible; there was no good reason to leave. The boss got the General Manager’s line boss on the phone back at company headquarters in Europe to help talk him out of leaving. He stood his ground and patiently explained how each of his reasons for leaving had weighed in his decision. “I left on good terms,” he says, “and eight years later, I still have friends in my old company.”

Like him, you shouldn’t shy away from thinking about the role of compensation. It’s well known in HR and executive

# Blind ambition

A C-level executive at a semiconductor company received an offer from another manufacturer that included greater responsibility and a significantly richer compensation package. After doing some due diligence about the new company and some soul-searching with his spouse, he composed a letter of resignation, marched into the CEO's office, and laid it on the desk. The CEO read it and began peppering the executive with questions: Have you thought about the effect this will have on earnings at this point? What about the new product rollout you're overseeing? It's only half complete, and now we'll have to change horses in midstream. And, as I see it, you haven't groomed an adequate successor, despite the fact the Board and I have been urging everyone on the Executive Team to stay on top of succession planning.

The executive had failed to consider the timing of the departure – its effect on the organization, on colleagues and on financial results. Though there may be no such thing as the indispensable person, some people are less dispensable at certain times than others. Had the executive thought more carefully about the timing and about how he might mitigate some of the disruptions his leaving would cause, he would have been able to structure and execute a less jarring exit. Instead, he incurred the anger of the CEO and other members of the top team. Slowly but surely, among the relatively small community of top executives in the industry, word got around that he was, at best, highly inconsiderate and, at worst, purely self-interested.

search circles that money is often less a factor than many people assume, and many executives will tell you that compensation is relatively far down on their list of reasons for a career move. But don't let it go at that, because you will likely be asked about its importance to you many times in the course of explaining your decision.

The key is not simply to discount its role, but to gain clarity about what the compensation really means to you personally. Insofar as you are motivated by the money, is its real meaning a desire for prestige, or simply wishing to be compensated fairly for your ability? Is it a desire to build wealth to ensure your family's economic well-being? Perhaps, in part, you would like to be able to enlarge your philanthropic activity or to have the wherewithal to pursue a lifelong dream at some point. It could be a mix of all of those motives. But note that those motives connect with powerful themes: self-worth, family, civic responsibility, and deeply personal aspirations. The real question is not whether you are doing it for the money, but what you want the money to do for you. The answer could help you clarify some of your deepest motives and prepare you to articulate them in terms that are far more powerful than the merely pecuniary – or the pretense that the money doesn't matter much.

You should also gain as much clarity as possible

about your professional reasons for making the move. Viewed from the outside, some career moves seem like the perfectly obvious next step in an orderly and logical progression. Other moves may appear to be counterintuitive leaps in the dark. The important thing is to be clear about what you see as the professional implications of your decision, not how it might appear from afar.

You can start by asking yourself about the appeal of the job. If it's in a role that's new to you, you may be energized by the prospect of a demanding learning curve. According to the head of Human Resources for a leading US financial services company, "I was going from an operational role to a strategic role. So I asked myself how I felt about giving up work I enjoyed, where I was working with people with a high degree of specific expertise, to working in a more ambiguous environment with a wide variety of people whose expertise I'm not able to judge nearly so well."

If the industry is new to you, you may be drawn by the opportunity to work with people who approach the world in a different way, or the chance to help shake up the company, and perhaps the industry, with some fresh perspectives. If you're going to a company within your industry, then the professional appeal might simply be the greater scope and responsibility of your new position

or the opportunity to try new things that your current company resists. The bottom line, says an industrial company divisional CEO we spoke with, is that “if you’re not feeling passionate about what you’re doing right now, then you need to rethink your career. Life’s too short to be devoted to drudgery.”

You should also be clear about whether you are running to something or running from something. An impossible boss, an intolerable culture, limited opportunities, unrewarding work, a company in decline – any or all of these could be reasons to flee. More positively, you might be leaving a perfectly tolerable situation in favor of a more exciting opportunity. Or the answer may lie somewhere in between. The important thing is to be absolutely clear about which it is and be prepared to address it. If you are leaving purely or partly to get away from your present circumstances, that doesn’t mean you should draw up a bill of particulars against the company and present it to the boss. Rather, half of the clarity lies in a forthright acknowledgement to yourself that a highly critical, negative exit conversation will neither cure the company nor help your career. The other half of that clarity lies in consciously adding up the positive appeals of the new job and being prepared to frame your move in that light.

Those personal and professional questions roll up into the practical effects and larger political implications of your decision to leave. First, understand the larger context in which the announcement of your departure will take place: the signal it might send to the market, the effect on the talent pipeline, and the projects or processes (such as budgeting, strategy formulation, compliance activities, etc.) your departure will disrupt. The more of these concerns you are prepared to address, the better. For example, working with your soon-to-be new employer, you can time the announcement so that it doesn’t come right before your current company’s earnings call or in the middle of a process for which your input is critical.

Second, think carefully about the many people with whom you have professional relationships in your current position. The list often turns out to be surprisingly long – your superiors, peers, direct reports, high potentials you are mentoring, customers/clients, analysts, industry observers, and others. Determine exactly who will be affected by your departure, what specific impact it is likely to have on each of those people, and how they are

likely to react to the news. The range of reactions may of course run the gamut from celebrating your success to being glad to see you go. Some colleagues may think they have reason to feel that they have been let down. Ask yourself which ones and why? How will the people you mentor or sponsor react? Will your departure alienate your customers/clients from you or the company? If the move is sufficiently high profile, how might it be framed by the business and trade press?

This initial exercise in gaining clarity about your personal and professional motives and the likely effects of your decision on people and the company will prepare you for the next phase of the process: making connections. And it will be of immeasurable help in the most critical of those connections – the pivotal conversation when you first announce your intentions to your boss.

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# Making **connections**

## Critical conversations

A star management consultant we'll call Tom had decided to leave his current firm in order to run an important geographical division of another major consultancy. Says Tom, "I was clear about why I wanted to leave, but that didn't make it easy." His personal and professional motives – an exciting opportunity in an international role – were clearly understandable, but he had failed to foresee the practical and political impact of his decision. As he result, he wasn't clear about whom to connect with or when and felt rushed to take some kind of action.

Instead of letting his boss be the first to know of his intention to leave, he notified his boss's executive assistant and asked her to relay the message that he was leaving and needed to speak with his boss ASAP. When Tom finally caught up with his boss to initiate a discussion about how best to minimize the impact of his departure, the boss said flatly "you're not resigning" and slammed down the phone. A second call yielded the same result. Eventually, his boss called back and asked him to take 24 hours to reconsider. The next day's conversation brought a handsome counter-offer and a proposal to fly in the CEO to help change Tom's mind. It was only when Tom made it absolutely clear that he was not seeking to improve his pay or perks in the firm that the boss admitted defeat.

The boss's initial displeasure was understandable. Tom had just landed one of the biggest contracts in the firm's history – how would they tell the client that Tom wouldn't be there to see through the project he had so persuasively

sold them? There was also, says Tom, "massive shock" among the promising colleagues he was sponsoring. Some wondered about the implications for their careers; others felt somehow betrayed.

Tom knew he had work to do. First, he sought out a trusted senior colleague for advice on how to repair the damage. On the advice of the colleague, he found new and highly accomplished sponsors for the people he was sponsoring. He then sat down with his boss and other key members of the firm to discuss how to handle the client. They discussed retendering the offer or even ceding the engagement to a rival firm. Tom, however, insisted on assuming responsibility. He contacted a board member of the client firm whom he knew well. Armed with advice from the board member about how to approach the project's primary buyer, Tom was able to keep the client's faith in the firm's ability to deliver as promised.

Today, he says the experience taught him some key lessons about the necessity of making connections in a systematic and careful manner in the course of disclosing the intention to leave. "You need to make every effort to keep all of your relationships intact," he says. "That includes soon-to-be former clients. No matter how difficult the situation, you must consult with them. And that consultation should be part of a larger strategy that acknowledges the need to tell the story of your leaving in a way that protects the firm from negative judgments."

As Tom learned, departure is sensitive. Be careful what you share, with whom you share it, and when you share it. If you have a relationship with a trusted senior mentor, go first to that person to get coaching and another perspective. This critical and entirely confidential initial conversation will give you the opportunity to talk through your personal and professional reasons for leaving and how you plan to mitigate the effects on colleagues and the company. It will also give you an initial reaction to your decision. Your mentor may make you aware of implications you had not considered, such as timing or the reaction of



a key colleague you had overlooked. Your mentor may also be able to suggest the best way to approach your boss with the news.

Your next conversation should be with that boss – the person to whom you directly report – not HR, a peer, or your boss's boss. Otherwise, you deprive your boss of the dignity and respect of being the first to officially hear of your decision and to respond. Prior to the conversation, you should review, refine and rehearse the rationale you presented to your mentor. Rehearse, also, how you will respond to everything that the boss might say, from offering you a bigger compensation package to getting angry or threatening to have you walked out of the building.

Do not begin the conversation by laying a resignation letter on the desk. Such abruptness not only appears rude but also, in a public company, what you put in writing and when may have consequences for disclosure. Start the conversation as you would a performance review. Talk about the positive aspects of the company, your role and impact on it, and your boss's contribution to your success. Explain that you've been approached with an opportunity that is right in line with your personal and professional goals. You are grateful for the experience that your current company has provided, but you are ready for this new step. If you do have issues with the company, frame them constructively in terms of what is working and where there might be challenges. Show that you care about the company. Make it clear that you're committed

to a successful transition and determined to maintain good relationships with everyone in the company. And you should agree with the boss on your deliverables for a successful transition – the tasks you will complete, those that you will delegate and to whom, and the issues you will flag for the attention of your successor.

If the boss wants to continue the discussion, you may have to have the conversation over the course of several encounters. No matter how many discussions the process takes, remember: you cannot control how what you say is received, but you can control what you say and how you say it. Stay positive throughout, giving the boss a voice in the process. Above all, be responsive, not reactive. If the boss gets angry, hurt or frustrated, don't react in kind. Listen empathetically for the concern buried beneath the reaction and respond to it authentically. You may be severing your professional relationship with the boss – at least for the foreseeable future – but you should strive to maintain the personal relationship.

Once you have succeeded in reaching a satisfactory understanding with your boss, you can then make appropriate connections with colleagues, including those you mentor, customers/clients, friends, and people in the new company and the new industry. There are of course different levels of connection, from the highly professional, as with Wall Street, down to the interpersonal level, but no matter their nature, remember always the goal is connection – cementing relationships – not disconnection.

## A failure to communicate

A top marketing executive of an apparel company had watched with dismay as the company headed steadily down-market, forsaking its long heritage of elegant design, quality workmanship and high margins in niche markets in favor of a mass market strategy for which she thought the company had little aptitude. No longer taking pleasure in her work, she accepted an offer from another company. But instead of going to her boss and allowing him the dignity of being the first to know and respond, she went to HR to begin setting the terms of her departure package. When she did meet with her boss, she was utterly candid about her reasons for leaving. The company, in her view, had lost its way. It was turning out shoddy products and its market strategy wasn't going to work. For good measure, she added that the head of e-commerce – whom her boss had hired – was impossible to work with.

The boss let her know that he didn't appreciate being the second to know of her plans, or being second-guessed now about his strategy or hires. And, if she deemed the situation to be that dire, he didn't see why she should tolerate it any longer. She was escorted out of the building the same day, carrying her personal effects in a cardboard box.

# Deepening **commitment**

## Promises kept

Given today's fierce competition for top talent, it is possible that you will find your commitment to the move tested by a counter-offer. Possible, but not necessarily probable. Many companies refrain from making counter-offers because they don't want to establish a precedent that might encourage other people to threaten departure in order to win greater compensation. According to the head of HR for Asia of a global technology company, "In the interest of the other employees and of ensuring internal parity, it becomes essential to refrain from practices that would lead to a culture of negotiation. It is far better to avoid such situations by having the right systems in place to detect early warning signs of the executive's dissatisfaction and address the issue then."

If you do receive a counter-offer, consider the context. In some instances, accepting a counter-offer may make sense. For example, following a merger or acquisition an executive may decide to depart because the composition and responsibilities of the new leadership team are unclear, but may accept a counter-offer if that clarity is forthcoming. Or, to take another example, an executive who has been hired or promoted into the wrong role may resign and then agree to stay if the right role is offered.

Consider also the possible repercussions of accepting a counter-offer. For example, if you get talked into staying, there could be a question about your loyalty at the company from then on. Your boss may ultimately feel blackmailed. Colleagues may resent what they see as your special treatment. The spurned company may feel used, especially if they've gone through the arduous process of a search, negotiating an offer, and perhaps even spreading the news inside the company and the board. If you nevertheless feel that you should seriously entertain a counter-offer, discuss it with your mentor or with some other trusted counselor who can help you work through its implications holistically and comprehensively.

If you've gained sufficient clarity – especially around the positive reasons for pursuing your new opportunity – you should be able to resist counter-offers that are ultimately not in your best interests and make clear why you are doing so. Further, having made that decision, you can deepen your commitment by setting a firm departure date. Two to four weeks is typical, but in some cases a graceful transition may take longer. In any case, the departure date should not be left open-ended, as you may find yourself bogged down for an indefinite period.

With each successive connection you tell of your intention, you reaffirm and deepen your commitment to the move. But you must have the energy and take the time to make those connections and to explain yourself – all within a very short time. We have often encountered people who remain tied to the past, unable to focus on the new commitment or the next step.



## Reversal of fortune

The CFO of a highly successful technology company had carefully laid the groundwork for his departure to another company. He had timed it so that it would not affect the company's earnings report or come in the middle of the annual budgeting process. He had carefully groomed a worthy successor. And he had thoroughly rehearsed the highly positive way in which he would present his decision to the CEO, with whom he had risen through the ranks of the company and counted as a friend. What he wasn't prepared for was the CEO's response. The CEO asked him to postpone the discussion for a day or two and meet again. At the second meeting, the CEO made the CFO a staggering counter-offer and asked him as a long-time friend and colleague to reconsider. The CFO wavered. More meetings followed and eventually the CEO wore him down. He agreed to stay on and informed the other company that he wouldn't be joining them after all.

It was a disastrous decision. The Board and the CEO of the jilted company felt badly used. As the next several months dragged along, the CFO began to realize that his original decision to depart was more about being ready for something new than about money. He soon began looking around for other opportunities, but his inflated compensation package frightened off suitors. After a year, he was finally able to engineer a departure, angering the Board that had approved the counter-offer and embarrassing his friend who had asked them for it.

One of the most important ways to deepen your commitment while ensuring a successful exit is to carry through on the promises you have made about your transition. "The worst thing you can do," says Grace Soriano Abad, "is to give notice, disappear during your final two weeks, and leave behind a big mess." Complete the work you said you would finish before you leave, even it means working nights and weekends. Transfer longer-term tasks to the appropriate colleagues, taking care to provide them with as much guidance as possible. Unambiguously and honestly indicate problematical issues that might arise after you depart and organize and flag unfinished business. "Remember," she says, "you will be remembered at your old company by the last thing you do."

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Grace Soriano Abad

# The long good-bye

Not every voluntary departure plays out over the course of several weeks. The time frame could be as long as six months to a year in some cases: an executive who has decided to retire early, a key executive who came on board in an acquisition and wants to leave at the expiration of his or her contract, someone who simply wants to take time off before looking for the next opportunity. In those cases, where there is no pressure to move quickly to a new job, an abrupt departure can be seen as particularly thoughtless. It is far more advisable to give much longer prior notice than a few weeks and to arrange for a far-sighted and thorough transition.

The divisional CEO of a global software services company timed his very successful departure over a period of nearly a year. He had been the CEO of a software company that had been acquired by his employer and he had contracted to stay on for a specified period. But he had discovered that presiding over a software division inside of a mammoth services business ran counter to his more entrepreneurial instincts, and he wanted to depart at the expiration of his contract.

Though he gained clarity about his decision over a period of months, he found that making the initial connection with a trusted confidant who might act as a sounding board was difficult. "It's true – it's lonely at the top," he says. "There aren't many places or people you can turn to." He did eventually discuss his plans confidentially with a close friend in the venture capital business and another friend in executive search, both of whom advised him to time his departure to the needs of the company. He then resolved to inform his Group CEO that he wanted to leave in nine months, through the company's fourth quarter.

Nevertheless, it required three conversations before he could bring himself to tell the Group CEO of his intention. "It was a 'gulp' moment," he says. "It's a very difficult conversation – you want the other party to have a fact-based response to your emotional decision." A second 'gulp'

moment occurred when the Group CEO came back with an eye-popping counter-offer. But the divisional CEO had rehearsed his response for just such a contingency and was able to refuse it diplomatically and convincingly.

He was also fully prepared with a detailed transition plan, a list of goals he expected to achieve for the business over the coming nine months, and a review of the enduring value he had already created.

"Enduring value is the legacy that you will leave behind and that will generate value long past your departure. For example, if you are a tireless operations executive whose signature skill is fast response to current events, but you have not established process or organizational strategies that will endure, your value leaves when you do. If on the other hand, you have cast strategy, organized teams and created operational processes that have changed the business, you've delivered enduring value."

By detailing the enduring value he had created, he not only helped create an amicable context for his departure, but also had a sound basis on which to negotiate a fair departure package.

Confidentiality was also critical for a successful transition. He and the Group CEO agreed that the departure announcement should be withheld until 90 days before the effective date to avoid undermining the executive's authority with colleagues. He continued to work as hard as he ever had, right up until his last day, and he believes that the company would certainly welcome him back, should he ever want to return.

In sum, he says, "The combination of mutually beneficial timing, patience, confidentiality, and a focus on the enduring value you have created and will continue to create during the transition will enable you to execute a successful departure – with benefits – and allow you the time to re-charge and find the next great opportunity."

# Conclusion

## An investment in your career

The importance of leaving a job gracefully often gets lost in the excitement of a new job possibility. With a challenging role before you, it's easy to regard your current role as already behind you, to neglect the nuances of a successful departure, and to close doors that should be left open. It's especially easy when your decision evokes resentment or hostility from colleagues. Easy, but a mistake. A careless departure not only forecloses the possibility of turning past connections into future opportunities but can create messy situations that distract you from focusing on the road ahead. You neither leave smartly, nor land well.

A considered and carefully executed departure should increase your personal brand and reputation at both the firm you're leaving and the firm you're joining. It should leave you with valuable relationships at all levels of your former company, people who are friends, references, sources of advice, and possibly future colleagues. At the end of the process, you should be able to answer a resounding yes to this question: if for some reason in the future, I wished to return to my old company, would they likely take me back? And a resounding no to this question: is there anything I've done in departing that could cast a cloud over me with my new colleagues?

Even the best of departures carries risks for long-established relationships and your professional reputation. Knowing how to minimize those risks is essential. Guided by the principles of clarity, connection and commitment, you can make the best of the awkward and conflict laden moments that are inevitable when you leave one position for another.

But these principles are a framework, not a formula; a guide, not a guarantee. To create a virtuous circle through clarity, connection and commitment, you must continue to iterate and intensify them during the transition period and beyond. Your initial clarity comes into even sharper focus as you engage in conversations with different constituencies to make connections. Subsequent conversations, based on the even greater clarity you have gained, bring deeper connections with bosses, mentors, colleagues and clients. Finally, your commitment to making the move can not only deepen with better connections, but a deeper commitment can lead to increased clarity about leaving as well as understanding how to better land in your new role.

**Ultimately, leaving the right way is as much of an investment in your career as getting off to a good start in your new job. ■**

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