

Why quitting is hard

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

KATE SHELDON is the director of acute care services in a medical center that's part of a larger system. She recently completed her doctorate and is ready to move into a chief nursing officer (CNO) role. Widely respected by her colleagues, she has received encouragement to pursue this goal.

Recently, two CNO positions were posted in her health system. She interviewed for both but wasn't chosen. Instead, outside candidates with less education and experience got the positions. Kate is frustrated and realizes she'll probably have to leave her organization to achieve her goals. A trusted mentor has validated her impressions.

But quitting is hard. Kate loves her work and her colleagues.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, was a firm believer in the old Native American proverb, "If the horse is dead, dismount." He often said leaders are good at starting things but less effective in knowing when to stop doing things that aren't working. It can be hard to give up a job, project, or relationship—even when you know at your core, as Kate does, that it's not going anywhere.

For some leaders, the prospect of doing something new or different can be stressful. Also, certain forces in our environment work against a decision to quit. Many of us respond irrationally to the prospect of change and continue to think we can somehow make it work. To quit, you must go beyond your comfort zone, sometimes leaving behind valued colleagues and well-established routines.

Much of what we do in both our personal and work lives is a series of habits, both good and bad, that have developed over time. Charles Duhigg, an investigative reporter for *The New York Times*, has written an evidence-based book explaining how habits form and

The author explains what may stop us from leaving our jobs.

what we can do to change them. In *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, he contends that habits make up 40% of our daily routines, whether at work or at home. What you see in your work environment is, in a sense, a collection of habits that have developed over time. Habits are the brain's way of saving energy. When we try to change something



in our lives, as Kate is contemplating doing, we must change our habits. This can happen only through intentional work, because new habits require extensive practice.

Also, quitting is hard because many of us have been brought up to believe quitting means giving up. We haven't been taught how to quit, and leadership-development programs rarely discuss the topic of quitting. When people do quit, it's often long overdue.

Three forces that work against us

In their bestselling book *Think Like a Freak*, authors Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner discuss three forces that work against us when we think about quitting.

A lifetime of being told that quitting is a sign of failure

Many of us have been brought up to believe quitting is a sign of failure. You've probably seen bumper stickers that tell us "Failure is not an option" or "Never, ever quit." We may think that if we stick it out just a little longer, things will improve.

That may be true in some situations but, as Levitt and Dubner point out, it's not a universal truth. We may simply have chosen something that's not a good fit for us.

It can take great courage to admit a mistake, both to ourselves and others. But we may need to admit our failures to get back on the road to success. Also, circumstances may change, as they did for Kate. Her organization was a good fit for her at one point in her career, but her goals have changed. She may not be able to achieve her dream of being a CNO if she stays there. Many of us have a bias toward maintaining the status quo and are reluctant to leave a job.

The notion of sunk costs

Sunk costs are costs that have already been incurred and can't be recovered. Examples include time, money, emotion, political capital, and education. If you quit your job, you can't recover some of these things. Sunk costs can affect your willingness to quit a job. You may believe you've invested so much in your job that it would be counterproductive to leave. To quit would seem wasteful.

People whose jobs offer high salaries, prestige, bonuses, or great pension plans are especially vulnerable to dwelling on sunk costs. These things are proverbial "golden handcuffs" that make it extremely hard to leave a job even when the work environment is toxic or the job is no longer a good career fit.

Failure to consider opportunity costs

Opportunity costs are the benefits you could receive if you took an alternative action. When we consider whether or not to quit a job, we may think only about what we're leaving behind. But staying in a situation also means you're potentially giving up great opportunities to contribute and be more productive. Kate could find that leaving her current organization would open exciting new possibilities for an executive-level position elsewhere. But she'll never know if she doesn't pursue other career options.

Reframing how you think

In his book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, Greg McKeown suggests we can win big by cutting our losses earlier. He notes that out of fear, we often work too hard to force something that's a mismatch for us. People wait much too long to make

needed changes. John Maxwell, a speaker and author who has written many books on leadership, observed that most people are unwilling to put everything on the table when evaluating what's working and what's not working. If something isn't required, yielding a great return, or bringing great rewards, he recommends being willing to let go of it.

Cutting our losses requires a willingness to be honest with ourselves as we examine our situation. Asking the right questions can help you be honest with yourself. (See *Five crucial questions*.)

Peter Drucker had a theory he called purposeful abandonment. He believed leaders need to establish a systematic way to evaluate their situations so they know when

to quit that which has become obsolete or unproductive. This is important advice. In their research on quitting, Levitt and Dubner found nothing in their data to suggest a decision to quit leads to misery; in fact, they found the contrary.

Although quitting her current job may not be a magic bullet for Kate, she should keep this option on the table. It could be the right move if a good opportunity presents itself. She might discover that letting go of her biases against quitting can be liberating. ★

Five crucial questions

When deciding whether to quit your job, ask yourself these five crucial questions:

1. If I hadn't invested my time or energy in this project, job, education, or relationship, would I do it again today, knowing what I know now?
2. If I quit, what else could I do with my time, energy, and resources?
3. Am I suffering from "status quo" bias and fear of change?
4. If I quit, will I worry others will think I've failed?
5. Have I gotten a neutral second opinion about my situation?

Selected references

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