

Answers to Career Questions

Finding new challenges, interview follow-ups and tips on deciding when to take a business risk

BY TAUNEE S. BESSON

Q: I am a national sales manager of a medium-sized company. I rose from the ranks, overcoming every obstacle to attain my success. Yet my success is empty. I make a wonderful salary, am respected by my peers and enjoy a fine reputation in my industry. My next step would be to try to become president of the company or a major officer. This is something I definitely don't want to do. I am 35-years-old and absolutely bored. Close friends and family members laugh and say they wish they had my problem. What mountains are left for me?

A: It sounds as though you enjoy climbing the mountain a lot more than the view from the top. Frankly, that's not unusual. Many people experience a sense of "Is this all there is?" once they've accomplished what they set out to do. Your ennui is a signal that you need to find another challenge.

Begin by pinpointing exactly why your career was exciting in the past. Is it because you overcame incredible odds? Produced order from chaos? Introduced a new product line? Penetrated a new market? Built a winning team? If you can determine the basis for your motivation you're more likely to reproduce a situation where you can use it again.

Give your company the first shot at your new sense of purpose. Propose a stimulating project that carries only a small amount of financial risk. Your enthusiasm (backed by your reputation and track record) may prove contagious with higher management.

If your organization doesn't share your excitement after several months of gentle persuasion, look to your industry. No doubt many of your company's competitors would be interested to hear your ideas.

My guess is that you will feel stale when you see no new challenges on the horizon. If you don't want to take your ideas across the street, you have two other alternatives:

1. Continue to find new projects as a sales manager.
2. Start your own company and keep it relatively small and close to your customers.

By staying put, you're likely to slip into the same malaise that is common among managers who have forgotten that work can be more than just a way to fill time and make money.

Q: Last week I had my third in a series of interviews for a job that is just what I've been looking for. Unfortunately, the interviewer hasn't contacted me about his choice yet. Should I con-

tinue waiting by the phone, call to see if he has hired anyone, write a letter expressing my enthusiasm, or what? This waiting is driving me nuts!

A: Your question prompts a discussion of two points:

1. What should you do in your current dilemma?
2. How can you avoid this predicament should you change jobs again?

Start by finding out exactly where you stand right now. You've probably avoided calling the company because you assume the interviewer will consider you a pest or you're afraid that he has decided to hire someone else. If it's been a week since you have last spoken, calling to check the progress of the selection process is reasonable (unless he specifically told you the decision would take two to three more weeks). In fact, your call will display both enthusiasm and initiative, qualities that most employers value.

Even if your interviewer has bad news, it's far better to know where you stand. In fact, a negative

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reply can be a partial plus, if you can elicit some feedback on why another candidate was chosen instead of you.

The interviewer probably hasn't contacted you because the decision isn't final yet. While this new opportunity is undoubtedly your number one priority, the interviewer may rank it as third or fourth on his list. He may have an unexpected crisis, an out-of-town trip or an emergency project to handle. Consequently, you may be on a temporary hold until his agenda clears.

To find out where you stand, phone him and say, "As I haven't heard from you in a while, I'm calling to check on whether you have filled the position yet." Then let him take it from there. If he says he hasn't, ask when he will make his final decision. Then call him that day or soon after to ask about his choice.

As you might have guessed, you must take responsibility for contacting the employer to maintain control over your search. To save yourself

future anxiety, ask at the end of each interview how your interviewer plans to proceed. Find out if more interviews will be needed and how soon they will occur. If it's the final interview, ask when a choice probably will be made and call if you haven't heard from him by then. Also, be sure to write a thank you note right after all interviews.

Waiting for "the big call" is never fun, but you can decrease your discomfort if you are willing to assert yourself a little.

Q: I've been a consultant in my own business for about four years, and while I'm making a decent income, I've reached a plateau. Recently, a new opportunity has arisen that, in the short term, will cost me a lot of time and money, but has tremendous long term potential. I'm torn between playing it safe and risking what I already have to build something more. Any suggestions?

A: While we all groan when people use cliches, there's no denying that they do have a basis in fact. It does take money to make money. It's also true that the willingness to take risks is a key ingredient in achieving success.

When you started your consulting business, you willingly invested both time and money in a fledgling project that had no track record. Your perseverance and expertise brought you to your current plateau. Further expansion will require the courage to take a risk again.

You probably have vivid memories of those first two years when you sweated to pay the bills some months and sometimes longed for a nice, safe job with a salary. Do you also recall the enthusiasm and sense of accomplishment as your business grew from a dream into reality? Do you miss that feeling?

Moving up the ladder, whether it be in an entrepreneurial or corporate environment, requires some sacrifices. You trade the comfort of a familiar situation for the thrill of a new challenge. Growth is scary and uncomfortable, yet many people feel most alive when they're pushing themselves beyond their current boundaries.

Four years ago you trusted your instincts when you began your new business. Now you have a track record and a good deal of experience in the do's and don'ts of building a successful enterprise.

If you decide in advance how much time and money you're willing to devote to your new project, and put together a specific plan of action, you'll minimize your risks. However, you must ask yourself, "Will it be exciting, fun and personally satisfying?" If you can say "Yes" with conviction, then go for it. If you can't, the potential rewards aren't worth the pain.

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