

Evaluating Your Options After a Corporate Takeover

And answers to other commonly asked career questions

BY TAUNEE S. BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08540. All names are kept confidential.

Q: I'm a victim of a hostile corporate takeover. Until last week I was the regional sales manager for a Fortune 500 company where I have worked since 1976. On Monday the new management installed its own man (after saying there would be no personnel changes) and offered me either a job in sales or a severance package.

I'm not sure what to do. The following questions keep rolling around in my mind: Should I take the cut in responsibility and be thankful I still have a job? Should I agree to the severance package, lose my security and look for a new opportunity equal to my current position? How difficult would it be for me to change jobs considering that I'm in my early 40's and earning about \$50,000 a year? If I quit to job search full time, will potential employers question my worth?

A: You have a lot of issues to deal with; let's take them one at a time. The decision to stay or leave the company depends on what you want from your career now and in the future. If you've been feeling overworked and out of touch with your customers, moving into a sales slot may rejuvenate you. Or if your personal life has suffered because of your professional responsibilities, returning to sales can give you a chance to achieve a better balance in your life.

Chances are that you consider a move back to sales a move in the wrong direction, however. Trying to lower your expectations will be difficult and may lead to increasing resentment and a lackluster performance. To get your career back on track you'll have to take a risk and look for other opportunities.

Not long ago I was working with Sue, a client who had the misfortune to be laid off twice in one year. As you may imagine, her ego was severely bruised. Yet after several months of introspection

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she said, "While this last year has been the worst I can remember, I've discovered two important facts: No matter what happens, I can survive. And my greatest security is my own talent and belief in myself." Out of tremendous adversity came the seeds of some real personal and professional growth.

As Gail Sheehy proposes in "Pathfinders," you can use your current dilemma as a springboard to finding a job that will fulfill your career goals. Your concern about your age and marketability is your greatest barrier. I've found that 40-year-olds who feel they have a lot to offer easily connect with employers who are enthusiastic about their maturity and experience. On the other hand, job hunters who are defensive about their age generally encounter interviewers who think they are "over-the-hill."

People who quit their jobs to conduct full-time job searches rarely are considered inferior to those currently employed. In fact, telling a potential em-

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ployer that you've decided to concentrate your efforts on finding the right job often inspires awe, not ridicule. Usually, the interviewer will perceive you as you see yourself.

If your identity is closely tied to your work, you probably shouldn't quit your job before you've found another. But if you can handle a lack of daily structure, a full-time job search may be your better alternative.

Q: I hope to combine 10 years of college teaching experience in the areas of interpersonal skills and communications with my interest in training to move into the field of image consulting. I am comfortable with my credentials and previous experience but lack direction and information on the best way to market my consulting services nationally. I would appreciate any suggestions and guidance you can offer.

A: Before attempting to market your services

nationally, polish your material and presentation on a local level. Just like the comedians who work their way up to the Carson show, people in training and development need to build their "acts" before they break into the big time.

Starting a service business is relatively inexpensive, but you will need to spend money on business cards, letterhead and an answering machine or service. If you plan to work with individual clients, you'll probably prefer seeing them in an office rather than your home. Some executive suites offer office and conference space, mail collection, typing and answering services for one overall fee per month. As an image consultant you must present yourself as someone who understands the importance of looking professional in a business environment. Creating this image is a critical part of your marketing plan.

Generally, your resume will suffice in lieu of a brochure at the beginning. Wait to develop your marketing literature until you have a solid idea of the programs and services basic to your business. These often change dramatically in the first year, rendering obsolete your expensive brochures describing untested programs.

To mix with other career communicators and trainers, consider joining the International Association of Business Communicators, Women in Communications, the American Society for Training and Development or your local professional speakers association. Their members may become clients or colleagues who can provide you with business contacts.

Develop several "meaty" speeches to present at monthly meetings of professional organizations. Contact your library or Chamber of Commerce for names of groups in your target audience. Send letters to their presidents or program chairs; they are always looking for good speakers. For best results, follow up by phone. Your personal contact undoubtedly will be more effective than a letter alone. Be prepared to speak for free at the beginning, until your reputation commands a fee.

Put together an adult education program that local colleges and universities can offer in their continuing education catalogs. Usually they have many excellent seminars taught by area consultants who appreciate the increased visibility. Your former college would be an excellent candidate for your first non-credit course.

Writing a column about image and how to

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Your turn to ask

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improve it also can build your audience. While it may be difficult to get space in a large daily newspaper, weekly papers and tabloids often are looking for good copy.

Once you're established locally, contact the American Management Association, the American Institute of Banking or the traveling continuing education branches of universities to serve on their part-time consulting faculty. They will advertise your courses and possibly send you around the country to teach.

Q: For the last three years I have attended a weekly staff meeting that, for the most part, has been unproductive and frustrating. Now I've been promoted and will take responsibility for the content and structure of these dreaded get-togethers. Do you have any suggestions about how I can shape this time with my employees into a positive experience for all of us?

A: If you feel that "We just can't go on meeting this way," you're not alone. Statistics show that poorly planned meetings decrease employee productivity and morale—before, during and after they're in session.

To rejuvenate your staff's faith that meetings will produce results, try the following:

- Be sure your meeting has a bona fide purpose. Often the weekly meeting becomes a sacred cow. No one dares to question its usefulness. You can squelch this mindless activity by asking yourself, "What is the goal for our next meeting?" If you can't think of one, cancel it. Give advance notice so that people can make other plans.
- Decide whether you need a full committee or if a sub-committee or one-to-one consultation is best. Too often an entire department gets mired in unnecessary details.
- Put together an agenda listing the items to be covered and the time you expect to spend on each. If you plan to discuss a complex issue, distribute background material at least one day before so people can prepare.
- As the meeting chairperson you should designate someone other than yourself to keep the discussion on track. Pick someone who has backbone and is trusted and respected for this role. Tell all participants that John or Sue's job is to facilitate a fast-paced, productive meeting. If anyone gets too far afield—including you—John or Sue will interject a pointed reminder that the group's momentum is flagging. While this may sound harsh, most people would rather be chided occasionally than sit through a succession of boring meetings. Also, you won't find yourself in the difficult position of leading the meeting and keeping people on target.

A good meeting requires the attention, commitment and cooperation of everyone attending. While the leader's preparation and style have significant impact, the participants have the power to facilitate or sabotage. Below I've listed a "dirty dozen" attendees who put their own agendas before the group's. As the chair, you must understand their motivations and deal effectively with their behavior. If you don't, they will often succeed in undermining your purpose and derailing your discussion.

1. The Mouth. This person has an option on everything. She loves to hear the sound of her own voice and will monopolize a meeting given half a chance. You and your Expeditor (the person you've designated to keep the meeting on track) must firmly remind "The Mouth" that you have a schedule to maintain and that other people have ideas as well.

2. The Naysayer/Yes, Butter. This person is an expert at throwing cold water on every suggestion. He shows his true colors by starting each of his

contributions with, "Yes, but . . ." Apparently, fault finding makes him feel superior. If you are discussing options, begin your session by stating that all ideas have merit and none will be automatically rejected for any reason. When the Nayer says, "Yes, but," remind him of your operating guidelines.

3. The Kitchen Sink just can't bring herself to stick to the subject. She is a verbal wanderer who has an uncanny knack for speaking paragraphs in one breath, making it almost impossible for you to regain the floor. Unfortunately, cutting her off in mid-sentence is generally the best method for wresting control. Just be sure to smile as you do it since she often is a member of the influential old guard.

4. The Interrupter knows whatever he plans to say is more important than any other participant's comments. He runs roughshod over everyone, grabbing the floor without waiting his turn. To restrain him you must enforce a policy that only the chair or the facilitator may interrupt the discussion in those rare moments when it's going nowhere.

5. The Sleeper's body is present but her mind is out to lunch. You can usually get her attention by running a stimulating meeting.

6. Don't confuse the Sleeper with the Observer who is paying attention but not interacting. Generally he's either too shy to speak his mind or he's processing the discussion and finds little purpose in stating his opinion. With him, follow a policy of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Unless a public contribution is critical to his career success, consult with him privately or assume he's in consensus with the group.

7. The Manipulator plays a wicked game of "I'm OK, and you're not." Her comments are judgmental and specifically geared to making others feel stupid and inadequate. This person is difficult to quell as she has honed her technique to a fine edge. If she attacks, counteract her sting by complimenting her victim's suggestion. You also might talk to her in private about her judgmental attitude, although she'll probably deny having one.

8. The Selective Ignorer has decided that some members of your group have inferior opinions. Often he regards people of the opposite gender or lower-level employees as universally undeserving of his time or attention. As the meeting chair, repeat ideas he has purposely slighted to reinforce their value.

9. The "Ain't It Awful" Game Player uses every opportunity to complain about things. Naturally, a meeting is her favorite forum. While she offers plenty of negativity, she rarely has any positive suggestions. Because her attitude can quickly depress the entire group, you or your facilitator need to point out that voicing complaints without alternatives is unproductive and time consuming.

10. The Zealot has an overriding mission that precludes discussing any topic outside his agenda. He monopolizes the conversation and will filibuster to make his point. Because his quest often is irrational, gentle logic rarely dissuades him. He requires firm handling and a one-to-one conference to help him realize that others aren't as dedicated to his cause.

11. The Overkiller is so determined to win your support that she keeps on pitching when you're already sold. A positive vote to accept her idea or project will usually cue her that she can stop talking.

12. Finally, there's Mr. Impatient whose body language and "Can't we get on with this?" remarks squelch useful discussion. He's anxious to get back to work, having decided long ago that meetings are superfluous and boring. If you run a tight ship, he will relax and participate. In fact, you can use him as a barometer of how your meeting is progressing: He's probably mirroring what others are thinking but would never say. ●