

## When Do I Know It's Time To Leave?

The late Thomas Fletcher, a nationally–recognized city manager during his time (San Jose, San Diego, Washington DC), mentored many young professionals who went on to successful careers in local government. One question he loved to ask was what aspect of the job was the most important. In Fletcher’s opinion, it was the meetings of the elected body. This answer surprised just about everyone who heard it but Fletcher had an explanation. “The meeting is the culmination of all we have done. In a way our jobs can be defined as working on implementing the decisions made at the last Council or Board meeting and preparing recommendations for the decisions to be made at the next meeting. It is the pinnacle of the professional’s activity.”

This view stands in sharp contrast to the opinions of many long-time managers

"I was sitting in a mind-numbing public hearing in the midst of 50 speakers from warring camps repeating themselves. I looked at the City Attorney next to me and whispered: 'Shoot me!'"

who have grown frustrated with the seemingly never–ending public process. Many of us have met local government managers who can cite how many meetings they will have to attend over the next year and, perhaps, for the balance of their career.

This sentiment contrasts with the excitement and enthusiasm with which we once approached our career. Many of us have had the pleasure of experiencing a time when our leadership position and the community needs and wants were in harmony and work was more energizing than it was a chore.

This change in attitude underscores the core question each manager ultimately must face: When do I know it is time for me to leave?

### Warning Signs

This threshold question confronts managers whether they are talking about seeking another management position or considering leaving the profession.

In our professional lives, here are some signs suggesting that a manager consider leaving:

- ✓ The public meetings begin to feel like a grind to us; we experience the meetings as something to be endured rather than an opportunity for progress.
- ✓ We have the feeling we have “done it all; seen it all,” and are no longer learning.
- ✓ We are bored with the details of everyday work and find ourselves cutting corners.
- ✓ We lose a sense of service to the elected body, demonstrated by a lack of respect for the decisions they make.
- ✓ We are reluctant to adjust to changes in our community, confident that the former way was “correct.”
- ✓ Some of us executives develop a feeling of entitlement, a feeling that the community is lucky to have us and does not appreciate us.
- ✓ Some managers may react to the election of candidates of whom they do not approve as a personal rebuke.
- ✓ We sense a loss of support from elected leaders and from the community.
- ✓ In evaluating personal options during hard times, we become more determined to stay, seeing leaving as “quitting” or feeling guilty about leaving the organization and staff in the lurch.

"I found myself impatient with new councilmembers, as they had so much to learn and the burden was on me to 'train' them."

We also experience warning signs in our personal life:

"I had to take a moment to steel myself outside the door to city hall before I walked in each morning."

- ✓ Often managers begin to feel the lack of enthusiasm, or even mild depression, at the start of each workweek and each workday.
- ✓ Many managers come to resent the lack of privacy and the media attention given to their personal lives and to their families.
- ✓ Some executives begin to seek greater fulfillment in their personal interests, in contrast to their lack of enthusiasm for the work tasks they once enjoyed.

To summarize, the five big warning signs include:

1. We have stopped learning.
2. As we go more on "auto-pilot," we are underperforming to the detriment of the organization and the community.

3. The psychic costs of local government management have overcome the psychic benefits and joys of public service and leadership.
4. We feel under-valued for all that we do for the organization and the community.
5. We are staying either for the money or because we have not figured out another clear and energizing option.

### **Three Choices**

We tend to fear and avoid change, even when we are unhappy.

Frederick Hudson, the developmental psychologist, suggested in his book *The Adult Years--Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal* that those of us at mid-life have three choices when we experience the "doldrums." (The "doldrums" occur when passion is lagging and there is "little wind left in the sails.") These three choices include:

1. Do nothing. This is the typical "default" response and dissatisfaction grows.
2. Make a mini-transition. Those making what Hudson calls a "mini-transition" find a "passion project" at work that energizes them (starting an in-house leadership academy, leading an affordable housing project, developing a new community library). Another mini-transition is simply finding a similar job in another community for a change in scenery and players.
3. Seek a major transition. This kind of transition involves leaving one's full-time career and pursuing one or several fulfilling encore pursuits.

All career journeys eventually progress into the doldrums. We do not think that the doldrums will happen to us but they do. A mini-transition can reinvigorate you for a while but eventually you will be confronted with the need to enter your next life phase.

### **What Do I Do?**

If you find yourself losing enthusiasm and commitment, you need to confront the doldrums. Ask yourself if you are experiencing some of the sentiments identified above. If so, here are some possible actions:

- Begin to note your attitudes and behaviors as you experience a vague sense of unease or dissatisfaction.
- Reflect. Either through self-reflection (for example, a journal) and/or reflecting with others, share your feelings and get feedback. Talk to your partner, friends and trusted colleagues.
- Ask yourself if a mini-transition will refresh you. If yes, pursue a new passion project or a new position or community to serve.
- Get a peer coach. Go to the Cal-ICMA website, review the profiles of the encore peer coaches, and select a coach who already has made the transition into his or her encore. Use a peer coach as a confidential sounding board.
- Develop a draft encore plan. If it is time to leave, embrace the decision. Take control of your life and begin to identify opportunities to renew yourself.
- Take some action. Select a passion project, apply for a new position, practice and rehearse an encore activity (teaching, volunteering, sailing) before you leave your current position. Do something and begin to see what works.

## **"I'm Done"**

If you are thinking about retiring, you may not be ready yet. However, eventually an incident will happen and you will have had enough. See the highlighted boxes for quotes from colleagues who experienced the moment when they concluded that "I'm done."

## **Listen to Your Inner Voice**

We tend to ignore the growing sense of unease and cynicism. We drift. Things do not get better--they get worse. Many managers who have made the transition into their next life phase have mentioned that they began to experience some of the nagging hints that it was time to leave but did not listen to their inner voices.

"I began to focus on completing tasks I disliked with a feeling that I hoped I would never have to do them again. For instance, when negotiating a labor agreement, the employees wanted a one-year contract but I pressed for a two-year agreement. That was my first indication that my subconscious was telling me that I did not want to be there to negotiate the next contract."

If you are experiencing the doldrums of your career and cannot find ways of re-energizing yourself, you need to move on--for the sake of the organization, the community, and yourself. We in local government management need to listen to ourselves and, if it is time to exit, do it with purpose and energy.

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### **Resources:**

Benest, Frank: "Keeping the Passion Alive" (*Public Management Magazine*; Oct, 2006;

<http://webapps.icma.org/pm/8809/public/feature2.cfm?author=Frank%20Benest&title=Keeping%20the%20Passion%20Alive%3A%20Some%20Lessons%20from%20My%20Personal%20Journey>)

Mathis, R. William: "When Is It Time To Leave?"; *PM Magazine*, 2000;

[http://icma.org/m/en/icma/knowledge\\_network/documents/kn/Document/6044/When\\_Is\\_It\\_Time\\_to\\_Leave\\_Here\\_are\\_7\\_Signs\\_of\\_When\\_to\\_Quit](http://icma.org/m/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/Document/6044/When_Is_It_Time_to_Leave_Here_are_7_Signs_of_When_to_Quit)

Garnett, Laura: "5 Signs That You Should Quit Your Job Today" (*Inc Magazine*, Dec 10, 2014; <http://www.inc.com/laura-garnett/5-signs-that-you-should-quit-your-job-today.html>)

Smith, Jacquelyn: "14 Signs It's Time To Leave Your Job" (*Forbes Magazine*; Sept 4, 2013; <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2013/09/04/14-signs-its-time-to-leave-your-job/>)

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, "5 Signs It's Time for a New Job," *hbr.org*, April 7, 2015.