Divorce Your Job?

Can you work things out, or is it time to separate?

By Elaine Varelas

Work was not going well for Rachel Branch (name changed), an employee of a large computer company. She had recently accepted a position as a corporate trainer, thinking it would be a great learning experience. But on her first day of work, she realized that the job was different than she had expected. The company had been through a merger in the weeks since she was hired, which had drastically changed the corporate culture and her job description. It also became clear within the first few weeks that she and her manager had very dissimilar work styles. He was hands-on, wanting to be involved in every aspect of her projects. She preferred to be self-managed, with more freedom in her job tasks.

Rachel knew almost immediately that taking the job had been a mistake. However, she had signed an employment agreement requiring her to stay for one year, and she was determined to honor that agreement. She also thought that it

would tarnish her résumé if she left the job too soon. She decided to keep a positive attitude and try to make the best of her situation. But things slowly got worse.

When she spoke with her manager about her expectations for the job, he claimed that she was a troublemaker and not a team player. He often complained about her work style, but when she asked him to give her concrete examples of ways to improve her performance, he was unable to offer specifics. Rachel tried to remain positive on the job, but she was beginning to feel defeated. She kept to herself and tried to get her work done. Just before her year agreement was up, she had a review with her boss and was put on probation for poor work performance. She disagreed with her manager, but wasn't sure what her options were.

Head for the bunker?

Rachel's experience isn't unique—or even unusual. In fact, many professionals find themselves in similar circumstances and don't know how to handle them. One mistake that employees often make is to adopt a "bunker" mentality. They keep a low profile and hope that things will improve on their own. But if you're unhappy in your job and your manager is unsatisfied with your performance, the situation will most likely get worse, not better. In many cases, it's better to leave the position even when there isn't another job waiting.

You may be reluctant to leave a job you've had for a short time for fear that moving too quickly will hurt your career. In fact, you may be inflicting more damage by staying. You're not going to work as hard at a job that doesn't satisfy you: It's difficult to be a star at work if you're just putting in your time and keeping your head down. That's not the kind of reputation you want to build for yourself.

If you find that you're in a situation similar to Rachel's, it may be time to consider initiating a "work divorce." But how do you determine when it's time to leave your job, and how can you leave with your reputation intact?

Conduct a realistic assessment

The first step is to take an honest look at your current work situation by conducting a self-assessment. At the same time, you must evaluate your boss's and organization's expectations. Asking yourself the following questions and answering them as objectively as possible can help you gain a better understanding of the situation.

- Are my career goals aligned with corporate or department goals?
- How does my manager view my contributions and style? Do they meet his or her expectations?
- Do my colleagues view my contributions and style differently?
- What has changed in this job in the last few weeks or months?
- Is my personal life rewarding? Does my job hinder that?

For more questions to ask in evaluating your work life, GO "A Love Match," February *T+D*, pg.14.

After answering those questions, identify any changes you can make to improve your work situation. Then, explore whether you're willing to make them. For example, if your career goals aren't in line with the department's goals, you must decide if you're willing to revise yours. (Perhaps your goals aren't realistic, or they have changed.)

If you take an honest look at your answers and realize you can make positive changes to improve your situation without sacrificing too much, then do so. In Rachel's case, however, the company's merger had changed the expectations for her position. She chose to stick to her career plans and change her job instead.

When it's time to go

If your answers indicate that leaving is the best option, you must then decide how to make the move. One choice is to quit the job immediately. But for many working professionals, that option isn't financially feasible. In that case, it may be necessary to conduct a job search while staying at your current workplace.

Another alternative is to attempt to transfer to a different department within the same company. If that's an option, be sure to evaluate whether the problems you're having are limited to one manager or department or are part of the company's systemic culture.

If you decide to transfer to another department, it's important to identify an advocate there by networking within the company. Try to get to know as many colleagues as possible. That serves a dual purpose: You will be better known within the company by a range of employees, making a transfer easier, and you can observe other managers' work styles. Another networking strategy is to volunteer for projects that cross departmental lines. Managers and colleagues from those projects can then testify about your work style if necessary.

Negotiating a work divorce

In some situations, the best choice is to leave the company even when you don't have another job lined up. Making the decision to leave the security of a job, even a bad one, can be daunting. But staying can damage both your self-esteem and career.

The information gathered in the assessment phase will help chart your course of action. If you determine that leaving your job is the best option, schedule a time to speak privately with your manager. This process can seem intimidating, but you must remember that it isn't personal. In most cases of manager-employee friction, there's no right or wrong: It's usually just a matter of different work styles.

When meeting with your manager, you should be

Open and direct. Have a frank discussion with your boss about why you're unhappy in the job, why you can't see the situation improving, and why you'd like to leave. You should give concrete examples of conflicts to illustrate the message, without engaging in personal attacks.

Informed. Have an idea of what type of severance and transition assistance you want to ask for. Although severance usually isn't offered when an employee quits, you may be able to negotiate for it in a situation in which it's mutually beneficial for you to leave. If you work at a large company, familiarize yourself with its outplacement programs. You can also research what the standard severance is for a person with a similar job.

Flexible. Offer to stay on for as long as necessary (within reason) to finish any outstanding projects. For example, if you're working on a presentation to be given at the end of the month, be willing to stay until it's complete. You should also be willing to leave on short notice if your manager asks you to.

Negotiations in action

When Rachel was put on work probation, she decided to approach her boss to negotiate her departure from the company. She assessed herself, her boss's expectations, and the organization's corporate culture and realized that her situation at work wouldn't improve. Despite several attempts, she was unable to ease the tension between herself and her manager.

Rachel met with her boss and told him that she disagreed with his decision to put her on probation, she didn't think she was working out in the position, and she wanted to discuss a severance and outplacement package. She also offered to stay for as long as he needed her.

Rachel's boss looked relieved, seeing it as the best way out for both of them. Rachel stayed on the job for another two-and-a-half weeks. She received a fair severance package and participated in the company's outplacement program. Her boss even offered to serve as a reference.

Many people make the mistake of sticking it out when they find themselves in unhealthy work situations. However, that doesn't benefit the employee, the employer, or the organization. It may seem that there are no options when your job gets rocky, but the reality is that you can choose whether to stay or leave. And if you handle the situation effectively, that choice can even benefit your career.

Signs That You May Need a Work Divorce

- Your manager doesn't acknowledge your accomplishments in groups or meetings.
- Your comments are ignored, and you're not encouraged to give feedback or share your opinions.
- Your manager doesn't make eye contact with you.
- Your manager communicates with you mainly by email or voicemail.
- You hear about internal changes from others in your department, not directly from your manager.
- Your manager pays more attention to your hours than your contributions.
- Your manager rarely, if ever, says, "Good job."

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