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Quitting Time

Should you bow out of your job? Subtle signs may be trying to let you know.

By Amy Dobson

One of the refrains commonly heard during bad economic times is "you're lucky to have a job." While a steady income is important, it's easy to dismiss the stress that employees who stay in jobs they have outgrown--or simply dislike--put themselves and their families under. In fact, this can have far-reaching negative physical and psychological implications that last much longer than a credit crunch.

The initial signs that someone is unhappy at work are often very subtle and might actually

show up as physical symptoms. Stomach pain, headaches and loss of sleep are common responses to a general displeasure at work. Norm Meshiry, founder of Walnut Creek-based Career Insights, says that his clients typically need a session or two to hone in on what the exact problem is. "At first it is probably more common that someone doesn't know what exactly it is that is bothering them," he says. "It gets all balled up as though it is a general malaise. Many people don't realize how

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miserable they are until they take a close look at what is going on." Then trying to decide whether or not to stay at a company, it can be helpful to step back and look at the big picture. It is easy to get demoralized because one long-term project isn't going well, but that doesn't mean the job is worth quitting. "One of the first things is knowing whether the culture of where you work fits the value structure of who you are," says Bay Area life coach Bill Baren. Even if you are in the middle of a grueling assignment, Baren advises employees to take time to look at the company as a whole. "If your values fit in with the unspoken culture of your workplace, then it is worth sticking around," he says.

In fact, sometimes people quit one organization and move to a different position somewhere else because that is the easy way out. One sign that employees have fallen into this rut is that they are very vocal about their unhappiness to all of the wrong people. " Oftentimes people complain to friends and co-workers, but the complaining doesn't go anywhere," Baren says. "A great way to proactively

take some sort of action is to go to someone who can make the change and offer solutions."

While it is intimidating to approach a supervisor to ask for a change in responsibilities, it might be the best option--especially in an economic climate where pink slips have replaced bonus checks as the coin of the realm. Before this conversation actually takes place, however, it is worthwhile to come up with a detailed list of what you want to see changed, including a list of possible scenarios that can make it a reality. "Sometimes if you make what you want known you'd be surprised what can happen," says Meshiry.

A common obstacle people fall into is what Baren refers to as the "trap of excellence." Typically this happens to employees when they happen to be slightly better at a task than everyone else on the team. Over time, he or she becomes the point person for a particular function, even if it really isn't a part of the job description. "Just because you are good at something doesn't mean you want to be doing that," Baren says. "If you say 'yes'

If there is repeated feedback that projects aren't being completed properly or on time that can be a significant indication that an employee is feeling stagnant and unengaged.

you are rewarded, but you have surrendered your destiny." Making the transition to fulfilling work can mean spending time on tasks that don't bring positive feedback you are used to--but that doesn't mean the change isn't worth it.

If you do decide to quit your job, it is important to build an exit plan that lays out your next steps. "If you quit simply to escape something, that doesn't serve you," Baren says. "When making this decision, it is much more important to focus on what you are going toward than what you are leaving." After all, people who are working today are going to be spending more years in the workforce than any previous generation, so they might as well enjoy it.

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