

How do You Know When to Consider a New Challenge?

Six Signs that You may be Ready for Something Different

By Ken Smith, Transformation Systems, Inc.

There was a time when most folks in the workforce were comfortable with settling into a lifelong career job that was pretty much guaranteed. Show up, do your job, retire, and life will be good. Within the last 20 years or so, that model has been changing. It's been changing in part because the nature of the **jobs at all levels require more collaboration, the missions require more integration, and the innate culture of the workforce and its capabilities continues to evolve.**



One thing that doesn't seem to change is that regardless of cultural differences, everyone wants to know that they have made a difference. Albeit at different rates of contentment, whether you are a Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, or the soon to arrive Zoomers, folks always want to know that their efforts for each work-day were valued. Leaders in organizations today rely on the information it receives from perhaps one of the most culturally diverse workforces ever in its history. All good, but what about capability diversity?

Most of the thinking today, and rightly so, still supports the need for subject matter expertise, and no one would suggest otherwise. But for those looking for something different, think about the six signs advanced here that you might be ready for something different and how it might affect your planning.

1. You've achieved your current aims.

How good does it get! You've arrived at the place you want to be. But, does that mean your "current aims" stop? When it comes to your career, if you are ready to retire, perhaps so. In this case, your new "aims" might look like being the most incredible grandparent of all time, becoming the world's best non-profit volunteer, starting a business among other noble goals. However, if you are still part of the career crowd, think about how you might "up the ante" to continue professional growth and the resulting value to both you and the organization.

Things to think about if this sign rings true:

- What do new challenges look like? Will they be entirely career related or broader? How will they take advantage of your strengths?
- Will new challenges help you to make a bigger difference?
- Will these new challenges allow you to grow? What skills and abilities do you need to work on and how would you acquire them?
- How do you figure out what these challenges are and make them happen? Do you want to stay in your immediate organization or move beyond? Do you talk with your supervisor, a colleague, trusted friend or maybe a mentor?

2. You no longer feel valued.

Albeit not often, it happens. There may come a time throughout a career when true or not, you no longer feel as valued for your contribution. You may feel that your voice doesn't matter, or your new ideas have nowhere to go. You're hitting walls all over the place and the old answers to the same questions don't work anymore. While it's certainly possible this feeling will pass, it may also be an indicator of the need to do something different.

Things to think about if this sign rings true:

- How long have you felt this way? Do you feel it is temporary because of unique circumstances? If so, is the best path just to ride it out?
- Is it possible the cause of these feelings are non-work related?
- Could it be a simple matter of work colleagues lacking an understanding of your critical role? If so, how do you address that?
- Have you raised the issue with your supervisor, or a trusted colleague or friend for advice?

3. You don't feel at ease in your environment.

Much has been written over the years about the concept of a toxic work environment and what it looks like from different perspectives. While full blown toxicity is rarely the norm, it can exist in various degrees to a point that it causes one to want to seek a new challenge. Some of the signs of an unhealthy work environment include things like senseless drama is intriguing you more than normal and resulting in uncomfortable feeling. Folks can't stop talking about what isn't working and you find yourself exhausted before the day is over. When the day is eventually over, you find yourself wondering why you were even there.

Things to think about if this sign rings true:

- How long have you felt unease? This is a critical measure for this sign. For example, leadership changes always produce anxiety across the workforce, especially when the new direction is do different from your norm. In 1965, Bruce Tuckman introduced four stages of team development - Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing. The concept remains true today. If your unease is the result of new direction, remaining to facilitate the change could be your new challenge? However, if it goes on too long, might be time for something different.
- Is leadership aware of the environment and if so, are they doing anything about it, e.g., surveys, focus groups, actions, etc.?
- Do you think it is caused by one person, multiple persons, or a group?
- How would you describe what "outsiders" think of your organization? Is it a place where they would want to work?

4. You've lost your MOJO and you want it back.

There is probably no one on earth who has never had a "slump" in their life. While never something to wish for, the bright side is we can learn from the experience. The tell tail clues that this sign rings true are that boredom is always on deck. But more important, you may be seriously ignoring your passion to the point it is or will be gone. You've concluded that just "getting by" isn't appealing and maybe there is a need to do something different.

Things to think about if this sign rings true:

- How long has it been since you felt you had your MOJO?
- To what extent has the COVID-19 Pandemic affected your MOJO and how would that impact your future effects to get your MOJO back.
- How is your health affecting your MOJO? Are you eating the right foods and exercising enough?

5. A change may no longer be a choice.

For some members of today's workforce, employment may no longer be a choice depending on one's circumstances. It may be as simple as the salary is no longer sufficient, or Work-Life balance needs a change that's bigger than what can be accommodated within current work policy accommodations. You may also be in a personal life transition dealing with health or family that requires something different than you anticipated. Alas, it could be as simple as your life priorities have changed to cause you to want to do something different. If so, in situations like these, especially if hindering your ability to focus on your work, a change sooner than later is often advisable.

Things to think about if this sign rings true:

- Are these circumstances likely to be ongoing, or is it temporary?
- Do you really want to stay engaged with work? If so, does your organization have policies that can accommodate your needs?
- Is there anything going on regarding this sign that you might want to share with someone else?

6. A new path forward sounds better than staying the same.

It's possible that none of the above signs loudly rings true. You may be perfectly happy. Maybe it's just a gut feeling that it's time for something different, even if only a lateral career move. Indeed, as a matter of organizational human capital management policy, many organizations today actively encourage healthy movement of talent, even across career fields, because there's really no substitute for experience. When the hiring deciders look at resumes for senior roles, all else being equal, too many, verses only one job, are not the ones that shine. The resumes that shine are somewhere in between and rotational assignments count.

Things to think about if this sign rings true:

- How much thought have you given to this sign vis a vie making it happen?
- Does your Individual Development Plan presently reflect this desire?
- Have you raised the issue with your supervisor? They may be disappointed to here that you want a change which is only natural. Working up the courage to have that conversation is always hard. Still, they need to know and most likely will be a big advocate in your quest.

Planning is critical.

When thinking about doing something different, any one or more of the six signs could be a factor. There is no particularly weight to them other than what you might assign. Likewise, you may have noticed that one concept which consistently shows up under "things to think about," is the importance of talking to someone you trust if the sign rings true. An independent perspective is always helpful toward planning a course of action, especially if you want to avoid burning bridges. Consider also what tools might be available, such as career navigators and individual development plan templates to document your next steps. A quick internet search will provide a variety of planning tool options. However you proceed, be sure to have a solid plan and perhaps a backup plan in place before you do.

About the author

Ken Smith is a former member of the Senior Executive Service and currently serves as a senior leader within TSI. He is an expert on leadership and government management systems. His decades long and lauded experience in government related strategic planning and measurement efforts at all levels is exceptional and has lead him to work with scores of organizations.