

Graceful exits in a professional career

Timing is everything

Jennifer Board



In this article, based upon my personal experience of the boardroom, I review what I have learned about the timing of career exits. I do so both as a contribution to my own personal growth, and a hopefully helpful gesture towards developing others. I share these reflections in the hope that they may be useful to AMED members, and others, as they grapple with important decisions about their network's future. I discuss the value of essential succession planning, and the importance of a leadership legacy, drawing upon the experiences of my corporate career.

Keywords

career exits, knowledge transfer, succession planning, leadership legacy.

Introduction

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts..."

(*'As You Like It'*, Act II, Scene VII; William Shakespeare, 1623)

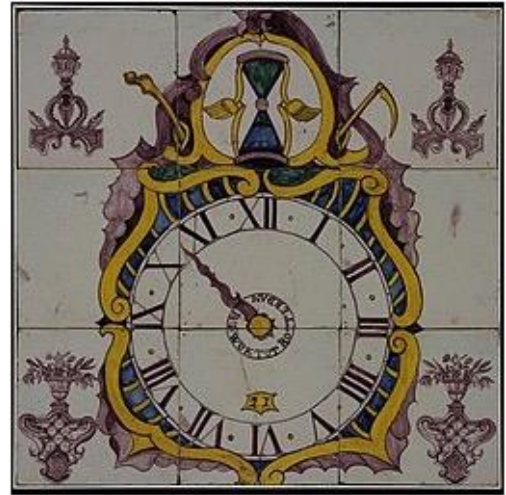
As leaders, when do we decide that it is the right time to leave the stage? When do we, perhaps reluctantly, accept that our time has come to bow out; that the end of our leadership hour is nigh; that our experience is becoming out of date; that the trail we once sought to blaze as our personal and professional responsibility and territory is better blazed now by others, rather than by ourselves?

I believe that time is when we acknowledge that we can, and should, make available our learning and leadership legacy to others (if we have not already done so) and that there are many other fulfilling and enjoyable ways in which we can now spend the rest of our time on Earth, whilst remaining relevant as a contributor to society.

I have come to see this also as a time when I could continue consciously to become a learner again myself, although perhaps in a different way, and to embrace a new future with different dragons to slay and of, as yet, unimagined personal successes and satisfactions to savour. The importance of continuous learning is implicit in the title of George Ainsworth-Land's book *'Grow or Die: The Unifying Principle of Transformation'* (Land, 1986). This injunction can just as surely be applied to people as to the transformation of corporations. People continue to grow through formal or informal learning as well as from direct experience. Otherwise, they risk becoming dinosaurs.

Tempus fugit, memento mori

At a particular point in my career as a corporate leader, a creeping realisation grew that both my capacity and desire to weather the cut and thrust of the business environment had become somewhat diminished. The fact that I felt neither as razor sharp, nor as acutely incisive, as I had once believed, was a sobering reality to face. Perhaps other corporate executives, professionals, management consultants, entrepreneurs or those individuals in a myriad of other leadership roles can also identify a similar point in their lives? To ignore such self-interrogation, to deny objective facts, is as futile as that of King Canute's battle of wills against the waves; the sea was always going to prevail. I am pleased to say that I believe I did recognise the time when it was no longer helpful for me to give my opinion on employment law issues (even when pressed to do so) as I had become rusty on the advances of case law since my retirement from corporate life; bad advice is worse than no advice.



[Mr Nostalgic, Bakuizen tot Rotterdam 1766](#)

Relevance through becoming a mentor or critical friend

The acceptance of this reality did not mean that I became less relevant. Rather, my relevance and impact actually increased once I was willing to accept these facts and adapt to them. I now had the opportunity to fully adopt the role of a mentor, or critical friend, and to be truly useful to others; to share the wisdom that I had gained through the school of hard knocks and the loss of innocence when experiencing and surviving corporate politics (courtesy of operating at the Court of the Borgia - otherwise known as board meetings). Although 'retirement' as such may come at different times, and mean different things, to each of us personally, the key questions are what do we want to achieve and what can we contribute now that we are no longer time-poor? Those who intend to fill this time with hobbies new and old have already answered these questions for themselves. However, I will return to this theme in the section on 'Life after leadership' below.

My Reasoning

What would the point have been, the value of the learning gained through many challenging circumstances, successes and failures, if we were not able to then help others to learn from our most humiliating mistakes and profit from our most spectacular – or even unsung - successes? We can be proud to bequeath the legacy of our learning to those who come after us who are destined to eclipse our greatest achievements. It is the way of the world to look to future generations, and it is more dignified and admirable for previous leaders to acknowledge and embrace this reality rather than trying to cling on to past glories.

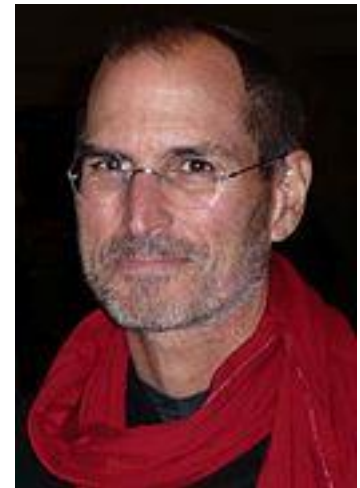
Succession planning and development

Steve Jobs had a saying that A players hire A players; B players hire C players; and C players hire D players.

“If you start hiring B players, expect what Steve called ‘the bozo explosion’ to happen in your organization.”

(Kawaski, 2011)

I have seen this insightful observation by former Apple CEO Steve Jobs borne out on numerous occasions in my professional career. B players could be described as average or over-promoted or under-confident, and who either do not dare take risks, or do not have the insight, to hire highly talented individuals (A players) who may pose a challenge to their leadership. Instead, they select less talented individuals (C players) who may be easier to manage and less of a threat to their own promotion prospects and self-regard. Whilst it can take insight and confidence to hire and develop others who are at least as talented or more talented than ourselves, it is a key responsibility of business leaders to deliver this pipeline of high potential people to the organisation, and it is the very least that employers should expect from them.



Steve Jobs with Red Shawl: [Jurvetson](#), (2011) [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Succession planning

As we prepare to exit, if we did indeed achieve the key responsibility that we may have claimed in our annual appraisals, then now is the time to test the veracity and effectiveness of our assertions. If we have developed our own successors, as previously professed, then we need to demonstrate our confidence in their abilities, most tellingly even when their decisions do not perfectly reflect our own views. It is also the time to demonstrate further personal confidence in our own abilities without the added benefits of the influence of power and position; to let go and move on with the next important stage of our lives. Letting go of the reins of power has never been easy for those who have held them. However, it is, nonetheless, a significant learning opportunity and a selfless achievement in itself, demonstrating the subjugation of the ego and the ascendancy of altruism.

Empowering the next generation of leaders: coaching and mentoring

Perhaps motivated by such thoughts, many retired leaders share their experiences with new leaders by engaging in coaching activities. Although this can be a useful and fulfilling way in which to transfer learning and continue to contribute to the world of leadership, there is a health warning here. With the best will in the world, it is not only difficult to teach an old dog new tricks, but it can be impracticable to teach a new dog old tricks. The strategies, formulae and behaviours which worked for an earlier leadership/management era may not be strictly applicable in the new world of business, as responsibilities, priorities and expectations may have radically morphed into a new paradigm. The ambition of achieving a corner office appears to have lost its allure, and is seen as “a metaphor for the aspirations of leaders where the steps to leadership were well defined and the symbols of leadership ... well defined and understood.” (Wilkinson, no date)

Allowing free rein to experiential learning

Thus, while coaching itself can prove of immense value, it is worth remembering that the ability to stand back and allow experiential learning to do its work, may sometimes achieve a more compelling developmental impression on our protégés than any amount of coaching along the lines of our own war stories and our preferred *modus operandi*, since the business world has moved on from the parameters of 'our time'. Wilkinson references the work of Professor David Jamieson in his definition of the 'Use of Self' that "new leaders are at their core adaptable, pragmatic and use a mixture of self-confidence to make decisions and act, whilst having the humility to understand they don't know everything", (Wilkinson, no date). That said, I do not completely agree with Jamieson as I had the privilege of working for - not many, but a few - 'old leaders' who also possessed all those skills and traits. So, in some ways, 'good leadership' doesn't change. These 'good old leaders' were A players with the confidence to build a team of A player Direct Reports; they showed the humility to accept that they were not always right, and the magnanimity to recognise and celebrate the achievements of others.

Life after leadership

Leaving the 'stage' can be personally and psychologically unsettling (I used to be 'important' and people wanted to know my opinion; now I stack the dishwasher). However, it can also lead to the greatest liberation of all. We gain the advantage of choice to spend time where and when we desire, instead of where and when it is expected or required by others. There is so much that leaders can then contribute voluntarily to their local communities or the third sector, if on a much smaller 'stage' and with reduced personal marketing potential. The skills gained by corporate and other leaders are transferrable in the best possible way to the direct advantage of the communities in which they live. The roles are myriad. To name just a few:

- members of local councils.
- trustees of local or national charities.
- governors of schools or colleges.
- volunteers to help the vulnerable.
- business mentors to students at local universities.
- non-executive directors of companies.
- contributors to AMED as a Council Member, supporter, coordinator of a Special Interest Group or generally participating and sharing as an active and committed member.

No doubt, not all retired corporate leaders may wish to engage in these primarily *pro bono* activities. Nevertheless, the need is there and the requisite organisational, commercial and leadership skills often exist in these erstwhile corporate leaders who are now, active or inactive, members of their local communities. Indeed, in the current national emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems all the more appropriate, for those of us who can, to give back to the society which helped to sustain us and our families through the years of climbing the slippery ladder of corporate promotion.

Celebrating the inner life

Having never been very good at self-marketing, I have often admired the creativity and panache of contemporaries who have professionally advertised their wares and the clear benefits that their expertise can bring to individuals and organisations. However, when the time eventually comes (different for all of us) to exit the corporate 'stage', then the need for validation from within may become immeasurably more important than that from without. The adulation of others is ephemeral at best. What is vogue is by definition temporary, but true internal recognition and self-respect are timeless. For it is when we look in the mirror and ask ourselves the difficult questions that we are truly able to reflect on the value of the trail we have blazed. What was the real legacy that we left behind? Did we help the enterprise overall, or did we hinder its growth and development through not confronting contentious issues e.g. the bullying behaviour of an influential colleague, the high staff turnover in the team of a big revenue generator? Did we help to develop the next generation of leaders e.g. by recruiting the best, or acting as a coach or mentor? Did we constructively challenge or submit to the perceived *force majeure* of the desires of the business, e.g. is this approach in line with the declared values of the organisation? In the end, that is all the legacy that we really achieve, and all for which we will be remembered. Did we do good or just not do too much harm?

My personal learning

When a corporate career has been lived as a series of consecutive sprints instead of as the long marathon it really represents, the luxury of time to consolidate personal learning through experiences (blistering achievements and abject failures both) seemed to me like just that – a luxury. During my career, I was always in such a hurry to achieve objectives and move on to the next big challenge that I did not appropriately prioritise the time for taking stock and integrating the lessons I had learned into my future approach. At best, it was a rapid review and speedy personal resolve to modify my approach. As a result, unfortunately, opportunities to significantly learn from formative experiences were lost. Certainly, I believed that I had 'learned' from previous successes, although undeniably more from my failures in judgment and focus. However, the need to drive on was ever-present; the need to support the business in its constantly changing priorities and its desire to beat the competition was overwhelming; an insistent drumbeat that was hard to ignore or deny.

Conclusion

One of the key decisions I made nearing the end of my corporate career was about when to step off, hopefully, elegantly. It should be neither too early nor too late; porridge neither too hot nor too cold. (Birchall Publishing, 2020). For most people, this is a difficult task to complete perfectly, and perhaps no-one ever succeeds 'perfectly'. However, it is preferable to leave the stage when the audience still calls for an encore, rather than trying to linger in the limelight whilst they try to remember what role you performed.

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About the author

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