

New job calls: Do you tell your boss?

It can show respect — especially if you wind up leaving anyway. But it's not a choice to make lightly

By Shia Kapos

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Ernie Arias, 37, director of sales and marketing at Hyatt Corp. in Chicago, talked to his boss about his future at Alden Hotels in Houston before accepting his new job. Photo: Erik Unger

On dark days, employees dream of marching into the boss's office with a two-word shock-and-awe announcement: "I quit!" But a brave few confide in their boss while they're still weighing the decision to leave — a move that may be either gracious and helpful or fraught with peril.

A sympathetic boss may persuade an employee to stay — or allow them to move on with a clean conscience. But a defensive one can force an employee's hand with a bad reaction, effectively eliminating the possibility that they'll remain.

That's what happened to Oliver Rhine, who worked until recently at a Chicago-area mortgage company. When Mr. Rhine, a cancer survivor, decided he wanted to work in medical sales instead, he opted to tell his boss of his intention before he was actually ready to quit.

"His initial reaction was knee-jerk," says Mr. Rhine, 25. "He thought it was audacious that I would come in telling him I was looking to quit. He thought it was a poor decision and that I hadn't thought it out. But I had rebuttals for everything."

That conversation was in July. By August, Mr. Rhine had quit before finding a new job, fearful of the changed dynamic with his boss.

"I was scared that he'd do something to sabotage my job search or try to prevent me from doing what I wanted," Mr. Rhine says.

Dale Zeimen, a production manager for Artists' Frame Service, part of Chicago-based Goltz Group, stayed with the company after better results from a similar conversation. He went to CEO Jay Goltz in 1998 after being approached by another company.

"I was told when I was hired that if you need to talk about anything, then let's talk," says Mr. Zeimen, 36. "I wanted a place where I could grow and learn; it wasn't about leveraging my position. Jay didn't talk me out of leaving. He just talked about where my career was going here."

Career experts say a boss's reaction to a trial balloon is likely to depend on two things: the company's environment and where the employee fits on its food chain. The higher the rank, the better the likelihood of a constructive conversation.

When Ford Motor Co. hired Alan Mulally away from Boeing Co. to be its president and CEO in September, Mr. Mulally, then an executive vice-president, talked about the offer with James McNerney, Boeing's chairman, president and CEO, weeks before making up his mind. "Alan and I talked about this a number of times, and I obviously pointed out that in my opinion he should stay," Mr. McNerney said in announcing Mr. Mulally's departure. "But it was very clear to me that there is an itch he had to scratch, and it was the opportunity to run a big company. And he convinced me he was going to do it. So I let him know he was highly valued because he is, he was."

GIVING (LOTS OF) NOTICE

Peter Crist, founder and chairman of Hinsdale-based executive search firm Crist Associates, says employees should express dissatisfaction or an urge to seek change on a timetable that's on par with their level of responsibility.

"If you're the No. 2 of a major corporation and you're thinking about being No. 1, you owe it to the board of directors and CEO to air the issue. You don't walk in and say, 'I quit,' " he says. "It's a whole different dialogue if you're a staff assistant and you walk in and say, 'I'd like to be a staff assistant of another company.' The boss will likely say, 'Don't let the door hit you on the way out.' "

Plenty of CEOs, though, say supportive environments shouldn't be available only to a company's top officers.

"I'd be disappointed if a key manager just walked in and said, 'I'm giving two weeks' notice.' I'd hope we'd have a dialogue before that happens, that they'd come in and say, 'I can't do this' or 'I need more money' or 'I want other options,' " says Mr. Goltz, of the Goltz Group.

At LaSalle Network, a Chicago executive search firm, employees meet with CEO Tom Gimbel on their first day of work and are encouraged to seek him out before making career-impacting decisions.

"We preach it to people we work with and to employees," says Mr. Gimbel, who is now negotiating with an employee who wanted to quit to go to graduate school. "She came to me, and now we're working out a strategy to keep her."

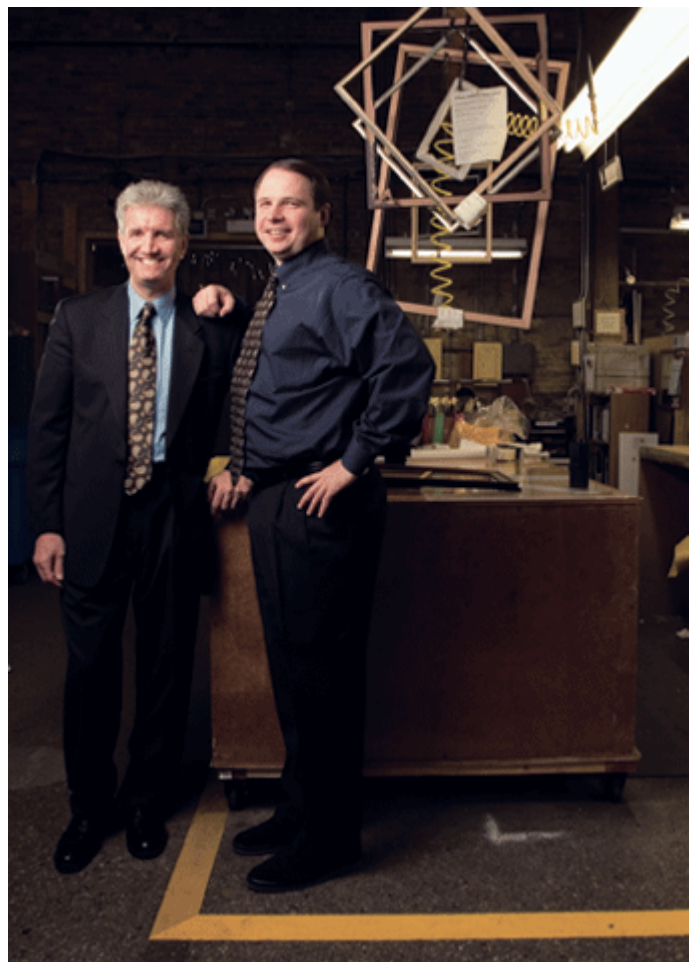
Employees, he says, can benefit from checking in with management before making up their minds about a move: There may be staffing changes to come, or opportunities that don't officially exist yet but that will be on the horizon before long.

"Maybe there's no job posting, but senior management might be thinking about it. A dialogue might help make that move," Mr. Gimbel says. "We see that a lot."

FUTURE TALK

Ernie Arias, 37, director of sales and marketing at Hyatt Corp. in Chicago, talked to his boss at Alden Hotels in Houston before taking the Chicago job.

"I really was happy where I was," says Mr. Arias, a former sales executive. "Recruiters came to me, and then I talked to my direct supervisor and the president of the company. It wasn't a quick decision. I wanted to know what the career possibilities were (at Alden)."



Dale Zeimen, right, a production manager at Artists' Frame Service, decided to stick around after an encouraging conversation with boss Jay Goltz. Photo: Stephen J. Serio

It was soon clear that Hyatt offered more responsibility, including a chance to lead a team. And he learned a lesson from his own time on the spot: "I'm now telling my staff to talk to me," he says. "If you're good, you're going to be presented with opportunities. I want them to feel comfortable coming to me."

Faylyn Moss says her bosses at Prada in New York bent over backward to keep her when she told them she was considering leaving her position as a divisional merchandise manager to return to the Midwest.

Ms. Moss, a Michigan native, had pretty much made up her mind to move to Chicago but wanted to talk to her superiors at the design firm first.

"They offered me a position I could do here (in Chicago), but it didn't work out because it required a lot of travel," says Ms. Moss, 31, who moved here without a job. "I'm still glad I talked to them about doing it — I left on a high note."

Yet she was surprised to find her supervisors dumbfounded by her plans, since she had always talked about returning to Chicago. "I had been there a long time, nine years, and was on the fast track," she says. "My boss was taken completely off guard."

Bye-bye Boeing: Alan Mulally, below, talked with CEO James McNerney, then his boss, about the possibility he'd leave to run Ford Motor Co.



LOYALTY IN QUESTION

Similarly, Michael Bassirpour, 24, started on the ground floor of Chicago-based Homescout Realty LLC two years ago but wanted to move near his family in Detroit.

"Deciding when to tell my boss was a difficult decision," he says. "I was worried about the boss's reaction, but I was more concerned about the company. I didn't want to hurt sales by leaving them unprepared."

In the end, his boss helped him find work in Michigan.

But Jeff Ellman, co-founder of Homescout and recruiting service Humatal LLC, says news that an employee has one eye on the door inevitably changes the relationship with the boss.

"If someone says, 'I'm thinking of dating someone else,' you're not going to feel good about it," he says. Similarly, "as an employer, you feel shocked. You've invested time and training and helping them advance, and then they tell you they want your advice on going someplace else. You'll find yourself not trusting them again."

Mr. Ellman cites Mr. Bassirpour's desire to live in Detroit as an example of when talking to the boss can work, as it was a choice made for geographical reasons. But more often than not, he points out, employees are looking for work at other — often competing — companies. Once that interest is revealed, an employee's loyalty will likely remain in question.

"You're not considered a team player" at that point, Mr. Ellman says. "The boss will wonder every time you take a longer-than-usual lunch if you're out there interviewing."