

Knowing When to Leave

When passing the baton is the right thing to do

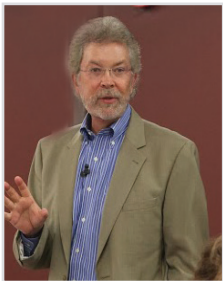
BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON

Robert Townsend once noted that, “True leadership must be for the benefit of the followers, not the enrichment of the leaders.” Sometimes, that means knowing when leaving is the best thing you can do for your organization.

The position of leader can be a rush ... even during the times when the responsibility of leadership is a burden. We are, as the leader, at the center of the action. We participate and often make the decisions. People listen to our ideas. We may even receive deferential treatment.

Former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was asked how retirement from the office of President had affected his golf game. He said: “How has retirement affected my golf game? A lot more people beat me now.” His response reminds us that the privileges of leadership are often most fully appreciated after they are gone.

There is, of course, a danger in a leader deciding to stay too long. A team can grow stale. Ideas that were once considered cutting-edge become routine and outdated. Organizations become entrenched in old ways of doing things and become irrelevant in a marketplace where new ideas are rewarded. Most important, leaders who overstay their effectiveness can become an impediment to nurturing the next generation of leaders who can sustain and grow the organization.



An expert in leadership strategies, Randy's latest book is *Make Change Work: Staying Nimble, Relevant, and Engaged in a World of Constant Change*. Follow his blog at www.penningtongroup.com

In the past six months, I have witnessed the impact of two leaders hanging on too long. In both situations, the respective organizations and the legacy of the individual leaders suffered. Over time, the organizations will recover, but both experienced a temporary setback that made the leaders' inevitable exit awkward and uncomfortable.

Sooner or later we all must step aside. The leader's choice is the terms on which the transition takes place. You can do the organization you lead a tremendous service by remembering these three ideas:

1. **Think about your legacy from day one.** It is easy to become caught up in a flurry of activity at the start of a new leadership position. There are always new ideas to implement and activities



that must be accomplished. In the midst of all the energy, take time to define the few key accomplishments that you want as your legacy. It may not always be appropriate to share this with others, but knowing your long-term goal helps you stay focused and grounded.

2. **Focus on leaving the organization stronger than when you arrived.** Develop successors who have the capacity and commitment to sustain the organization in the future. The leader is merely the keeper of the vision for a finite period of time. Without capable succession, the organization will eventually perish.
3. **Plan your encore early.** Perhaps you have seen a leader who can't let go. Don't be that person. Planning for your days as a past leader is like preparing for your retirement. Both are more rewarding if you have deliberately planned what comes next.

Speaking of Next

The “Choose to Lead” column first appeared in *Right of Way Magazine* in May/June 2010, and since then, 26 leadership articles have been published. As a resource for future leaders, IRWA will be assembling these into a Choose to Lead Anthology for members to download from the IRWA University, where a series of Leadership Institute videos are also available. Topics include Delegation and Empowerment, Developing and Utilizing a Strategic Plan, Providing Effective Recognition and Make Meetings Work.

While I will continue writing articles for the magazine, this is my last regularly featured column. I encourage you to connect with me via LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. You can also follow my blog.

Everyone leads. Effective leadership has very little to do with position and everything to do with your willingness and capability to influence others in a positive direction. I trust that you will continually choose to lead. 🌟