

How to Prepare the Ideal Agency Exit Strategy

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Even though Kathy made a point of assuring John that he had nothing to do with her leaving, John couldn't help but feel that it was his fault. As far as he was concerned, this was just another case of an adult abandoning him because he was too difficult to get along with. He was more convinced than ever that he was no good and that it really wasn't worthwhile to try to get close to and trust adults. (Krueger, 1986)

In the preceding quote Mark Krueger illustrates just one of the many dynamics that may take place when leaving a job working with children and families. Separation is a part of life, but for children in care it is a much more common phenomenon than for others. If the child is in residential or foster care, they have already experienced the trauma of being removed from their primary family – and likely have had that experience multiple times. There are predictably many more separations from people they have come to care about and who will care for them. Ironically, the very nature of the work we do is to enable separation as quickly as possible as we work to move the child to the least restrictive level of care. A large number of separations from caring for people may be inevitable in some situations, but the way in which those separations are managed can go a long way in causing more damage to children. They may provide a painful learning experience or perhaps a valuable corrective learning experience for that child.



November 2019

ISSN 1605-7406

Departure from a job can also be an important and potentially painful experience. It is often said that you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. Similarly, we never get a second chance to make a good closing impression. How we leave a job has a major impact on our professional reputation. It will follow us in our career in terms of our image, relationships, references, etc. More importantly, how we leave may have a profound impact on the children and families we work with. We may be leaving a job we love and have to face the reality of separating from peers and children that we care very much about. We may be leaving a job that we are not happy in and we may have feelings of anger and disappointment about our experience there. Whichever the case, leaving can be a very stressful experience for us. Very often too little thought is given to a sound, professional, and sensitive exit strategy as we depart. The more stress we feel, the more tempting it is to take short cuts in the process. This makes for an even greater necessity to have the proper supports for ourselves available. The following key factors can be part of a sound professional separation process and provide a working template for making a plan to leave a job in the best way possible.

1. Making the decision

Making the decision to leave a job is one of the most important decisions a person may have to make in their career. There are many different reasons you may choose to leave. Some may be situational, such as re-locating where you live or entering school. Other reasons may be taking a new opportunity to grow, being unhappy with the type of work, not liking your supervisor, etc. Many times, the non-situational decisions will involve strong emotions that may sometimes cloud our thinking about the decision. If you are leaving in a way that is raising strong emotions for you, it is important to have trusted people to help you clarify your thoughts



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ISSN 1605-7406

in order to help make the decision in the most considerate way possible. It is optimal to make a list of practical pros and cons before making a final choice about your future. If changes in working conditions would help to stay, you may want to have a discussion with your supervisor or Human Resources to see if those adaptations may be possible. If you are actively seeking another position it would be important to decide whether to disclose attending interviews for new positions, or risk your employer finding out through a rumour or someone else.

2. Telling your supervisor

Once you have firmly made your decision to leave, the first person you should notify is your direct supervisor. It is the most appropriate professional protocol and, no matter the nature of your relationship, your supervisor deserves the respect to know first. If you choose to initially disclose it to someone above your supervisor, that will likely reflect negatively on you with more senior people in the agency as well as hurt your relationship with your supervisor. If your reason for leaving is directly connected with discomfort with your supervisor, you may want to first talk to a trusted friend or mentor outside of the agency to help you frame your departure and what to say. The basic guideline for how to frame the reason with your supervisor is to be truthful and if it is related to a negative feeling about your supervisor or the agency be sure to frame it gently.

3. Your resignation letter

You should have your resignation letter finished when you tell your supervisor but it should not be turned in until talking with your supervisor face to face. It is very important to focus carefully on the content and tone of the letter. There are templates on the internet that you could use and customize to your particular situation. It would be wise to have someone



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ISSN 1605-7406

more experienced and savvy about organizational politics review it with you before you submit it. This would be crucial particularly if you have negative feelings toward the agency or your supervisor. The letter should be brief, positive in tone and give a brief reason for leaving. It should be dated the date you turn it in and should give the date of your last day of work based on the notice you are giving. Try to frame your experience in the job as truthfully positive as possible with an emphasis on ways you have grown during the time there. It would also be wise to close wishing the agency and those remaining there well in the future.

4. How much notice to give

Most agencies have a clear policy about how much notice is required when leaving the job. You should definitely be sure to give the minimum notice but ideally, especially if you are working directly with children and families, you should give as much notice as possible. Generally, thirty days is an ideal time for professional notice. The children and families you are working with have likely had many different people come and go while being in care. It is crucial you leave enough time for them to digest that you are leaving and to have time to process that with you. You also may have made many relationships with children and families that have become important to you, so you will want to have time and a strategy to process the separation for yourself. Keep in mind that if you try to “short-cut” the amount of notice you give you will leave a bad impression with the agency and likely make a negative first impression with your new agency. Experienced interviewers pay close attention to the question about how much notice you plan to give the position you are leaving. They will assume how you leave the job you are currently in will mirror how you will leave them.



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5. Telling peers and others in the agency

It is advisable to tell peers and others in the agency in a thoughtful manner. Keep in mind when you tell your supervisor and submit your resignation letter, it will likely leak out to some staff in short order. You should also be aware that once you tell other staff it will likely leak out to the kids and possibly families shortly after. Therefore careful coordination of letting people know should be a priority. Ideally it should all be done very close together to minimize the chance of kids learning through others which would exacerbate whatever significant feelings of loss some may have. In a smaller setting, you may choose to tell peers individually or in a team meeting. In a larger agency with many people, you may choose to do so through an e-mail blast. In an e-mail blast, try to parallel your process to the one with the resignation letter. Your reason for leaving should be framed as positively as possible and it is important to wish people and the program well when you are gone. You should be extra careful not to give people any reason to read between the lines and interpret “sour grapes” or negative feelings about the agency or particular people. To avoid any misunderstanding, you should not send that e-mail directly, but ask Human Resources and your Supervisor to approve it and ask that the e-mail be sent from one of their e-mail accounts. This will assure people you are not trying to cast negative aspersions. Never burn bridges professionally - even subtly.

6. Make a list of all your responsibilities for the person replacing you - if possible, help your replacement with the transition

It is important to make a list of all your responsibilities that you can leave for the person who will be replacing you. This might include tips you have learned to complete assignments most effectively. It could also include things like important contacts you have had with “gatekeepers”,



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ISSN 1605-7406

peers around your agency, and with collaborating agencies that might be important contacts for them as they settle in. If your relationship was good with these contacts be sure to let them know you are leaving and to give your successor their names. Remember no matter what your feelings are about the agency as you are leaving your main responsibility is to the children and families you have been providing services to. The smoother the new person transitions into your role, the better the future service to children and families.

7. Cleaning out your office and computer

As you are leaving, you want to be sure you take any personal items with you and turn in all of the agency property given to you (e.g., keys, books). Although agency maintenance staff will likely be responsible to clean after you are gone, you want to be sure you leave the office in sparkling clean shape on your last day. Perhaps, a handwritten welcome note for your replacement would be a nice touch. Go through your computer files thoroughly to be sure that any personal information or communications have been deleted. You should also be sure there are no informal communications there with colleagues that would reflect badly on others in the agency. We recently heard a horror story of a new worker turning on her computer on her first day only to find an e-mail her predecessor wrote to a colleague saying awful and defaming things about the new person's supervisor. This put the new person in an agonizing position of what to do with the e-mail given the defamation issues as well as leaving them with a negative pre-conception of their new supervisor. If you have access to the agency e-mail system when you are off-site, be sure you alert the IT Department to close out your account on the last day. Put an "away message" on the agency e-mail account alerting people of your departure date with directions for who to contact in your absence. Do the



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ISSN 1605-7406

same with your phone voicemail and have directions if someone is calling with an emergency.

8. No “bad-mouthing”, even informally to peers

Departure from a job raises many different feelings within us. Sometimes, if we were unhappy or frustrated with the job or people we worked with, there is temptation to vent as we are making the transition or after we have left. It is crucial to put just as much effort to avoid negativity in our informal communications with people as we did in our formal communications. This may be even more tempting if peers are also unhappy, or in social conversations in a restaurant or bar as you get together with people. The world is a very small place and the helping professions world seems even smaller. You want to be sure you don't burn any bridges and keep yourself on the professional high road as you leave. It will benefit you greatly going forward and you will be prouder of yourself down the road.

9. Having a farewell party?

In many agencies, the agency or supervisor will plan a farewell party for the person leaving. If this is the case for you, try to gracefully have input on the form in which the party will take to best fit your comfort zone. Will you be asked to give a speech? Will others give speeches? Where will it be held? If people will be asked to contribute to the cost of the party, keep in mind some may have to miss it if they cannot afford the donation. If alcohol is involved, keep in mind it is still a professionally connected event. If a farewell party is set up that will be with the children, be sure to be aware many of the kids will have strong emotions about you leaving. That may play out at or after the party. Talk with your supervisor about a plan for kids or parents who may give you gifts and how to handle that. If the party



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ISSN 1605-7406

with the kids is in a group setting try to be sure you are able to stay for a while after to process strong feelings that may have popped up from kids. Additionally, check in that there will be sufficient adult presence after you leave the party to process with kids who may be extremely upset after you leave the party.

10. Use of supervision or mentors

Unfortunately, it is all too common that when someone has handed in their resignation the amount of supervision time they get is lessened. The supervisor may find other priorities and the person leaving is busy taking care of everything they need to while in the transition. In reality, exactly the opposite should occur. The amount and depth of supervision should increase during the transition period. It is important to the supervisor to be able to monitor the transition process to be sure it is going smoothly. You may feel that you cannot complete certain tasks before leaving and the supervisor would be able to provide support or extra resources for that to happen. You may have strong emotions about leaving or trouble prioritizing your work with the extra responsibilities. Supervision would be a very good place to process those feelings and get help with the priority struggles. If you are having difficulties with your supervisor, or don't feel comfortable discussing your feelings with them, you may want to spend time processing the feelings and other aspects of the leaving process with someone you trust (i.e., a mentor). You will need someone you trust to reflect on the feelings and help you be as self-aware as possible as you go through the emotional part of this journey.

11. Telling the children and families

Perhaps the most crucial part of your leaving process is the way in which you process and support the children and families you are providing



November 2019

ISSN 1605-7406

services to. For kids and families who have been in care for any length of time, it is likely many people have come and gone from their lives. It is never wise to assume “they are used to it”. Many have developed a protective shell of being resigned to it, but each one can be very painful. How the process goes is crucial for them going forward. When planning to tell the kids you are leaving, keep in mind it should be very close to when you tell your supervisor and peers to minimize the chance of them hearing it from other sources. If you are working with kids in a group setting, try to announce it in a group meeting to minimize it being transmitted through the “telephone game” where the message is distorted as it passes through each person. Ideally your supervisor would be present and enough adults to be supportive to kids in case any are upset after they hear the news. Keep in mind, it is a natural tendency for kids to be angry about it and some may say things that are hurtful to you (“See, you never really cared about us” or “Who cares, I really hate you”, etc.). It is important to frame the announcement and reason you are leaving in a similar fashion to what you have said to the others. It should be as honest as possible and framed positively. It is very common for kids to blame themselves when adults they care about leave. You should be prepared for that dynamic and be well prepared for questions the kids may have after your announcement. It is important to not leave directly after the meeting and be available to spend some time individually with kids for a couple of hours, or just to “hang out” with them. If you work with kids or families in individual contacts, you should consider following the basic themes above in your individual meetings if meeting with them in a group is not logistically possible. If your regular contacts are primarily in individual settings, try to be sure there is at least one more meeting together after you tell them to be able to process feelings and what they can expect going forward. Don’t forget yourself. When making these kinds of announcements, it may be very stressful and



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ISSN 1605-7406

emotional for you. Try to be sure you have supports set up for you afterwards to talk about the day and settle your emotions.

If you have been working with the families you should think about how you will inform them of your departure. You may want to talk to your supervisor about the idea of writing a formal letter to parents, either from you or the supervisor. The letter should let them know you are leaving, give the date you will be gone, and that you are available to talk with them during the transition. You should also let them know, to the best of your knowledge, what the plan will be for their child and them after you leave. If you know who your replacement will be, you can make an “introduction” of sorts by copying them on the letter. If you do not know your replacement be sure to make it clear who at the agency they can contact if they have questions about their child after you are gone.

12. Giving a “warm hand-off”

In discussing attachment and loss, Branch and Brinson (2007) talk about the importance of assuring a child the remaining adults will take care of them. If you are aware who your replacement will be, it would be crucial to spend time with them to familiarize them with your work and with the children they will be working with. If at all possible, there should be a joint meeting with you, your replacement, and the children to give a “warm hand-off” of caring responsibilities as a visual way to assure children that they will be cared for when you are gone.

The challenge

“One of the major challenges of our work is to engage young people and their families and then to disengage gracefully, in a manner that promotes the consolidation of gains made during placement” (Mann-Feder, 2003). It is important that we take extra care to leave the job in as



November 2019

ISSN 1605-7406

thoughtful and professional a way as possible. If we sever relationships that are important for us, the children and their families, there is great potential for high stress and future damage. However, if we are able to disengage in a positive, caring and therapeutic way, it has great potential to serve as a learning experience for what positive separations can be and to solidify the positives that were built in the time together. Ideally, it will give the message to children and families “they are worthy of the relationship and care you gave them” and that they were also very important people in your life.

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November 2019

ISSN 1605-7406