

## how to leave a group profitably

Things change.

There comes a time when we have to move on.

This is normal.

This is good.

No one signs up for ever.

- *Imagine if you could only buy, never sell.*
- *What if you could receive email, but not answer it.*
- *Or if you could get on a highway, but there were no exits.*
- *What if phones could answer calls, but not hang up.*

It's easy to see that beginnings combined with endings are what make the world go round.

But how we end matters.

- *We can sell at a loss or a profit.*
- *There is no obligation to respond to email solicitations.*
- *A bottleneck at the end of an exit ramp will bring a commute to a standstill.*

## the first thing to do when it's time to leave

is to choose a profitable reason. Telling a member the group isn't working for you will only make them wonder about your judgment.

It works like this:

**-You think:** *Kris is terrific, I'll reach out.*

**You say:** "Kris, we've missed you at the Business Association meeting the last couple of months."

**Kris replies:** "Yeah. I'm just not getting anything out of it. I didn't renew."

**You say:** "Oh, I'm sorry. Is there something we can do about that?"

**Kris says:** "Nah, it didn't work for me. The members aren't my type of client, the programs were boring, it isn't working for me."

**-You think:** *Why didn't you join the board and make a difference.*

**You say:** "Well, I'll see you around."

**-You think:** *That's the end of Kris.*

And the next time you update your contacts, Kris is one of the records you delete.

Don't let Kris be you.

## begin with a profitable reason.

Your goal is an "Oh, of course. Congratulations!" response.

Perhaps

- you're expecting a new baby
- your biggest client wants you on-site at this time
- you got a promotion with new responsibilities
- you're working on a goal deadline (*like finishing a book!*)
- you're moving
- you're going back to school

Do not use a reason that sounds like an excuse: *<read in a whiney tone of voice>*

- It's just too far to drive
- It's my busy season
- I don't like getting up in the morning
- It's just getting harder and harder to get here
- The new board seems out of touch
- The programs just aren't doing it for me
- I'm not getting anything

Do not use a reason that sounds like blame: <read with your thumb in your mouth>

- My boss is making me quit
- my boss has another association she wants me try out
- I just can't afford it
- it's too time consuming
- I'm going to focus my energies on something better
- I'm not getting anything.

Particularly avoid every variation of *"I'm not getting anything."*

We are each responsible for what we get. To admit that you aren't getting anything is broadcasting that you aren't self responsible—you won't be responsible if they refer a client to you, or choose to do business with you themselves.

Imagine a member saying to you, *"I brought on five new clients last month; that much growth so fast means I'm going to have to give up a few things right now."*

There's only one answer to that—*"Wow! Congratulations!"*

the first people to tell when it's time to leave are the current officers.

(And, may I tell you, sincerely, *with my hand on your shoulder, looking right into your eyes*, that unless you are moving out of town, changing industries, or die, do not leave a group when you are in a leadership position. Just don't do it. Keep your word. Show responsibility. If you have a valid reason, *a reason I would accept*, for leaving during the leadership term, go to the coda for special instructions.)

Never blindside the officers. First go to the president. Make sure the president hears it first, from you. Then tell the other officers—don't ask someone else to add this duty of yours, the duty of letting others know, to their task list; it is your responsibility to communicate completely if you want them to think well of you and send you future business and referrals.

And you do. You've made an investment in getting to know these people; it's your responsibility to make it pay off.

For ever.

tell everyone.  
In person.

Well, you don't have to tell everyone—just the people who you want to get referrals from in the future.

And you don't have to tell them in person, you just have to tell them

- personally, one at a time,
- by voice.

This means you can not exit by email.

You want these people to feel comfortable staying in touch with you. If you leave in a way that says *"I'm outta here."* you'll be outta their contact list.

Here's the way it works: each person you don't speak with personally will think they aren't important to you . . . so why should you be important to them?

To leave profitably speak with people before and after the next meeting, tell them when you see them somewhere else, have a phone conversation, or leave a detailed voicemail message. These four ways are equally profitable for you. *And your profitability is why you decided to leave.*

## give it some time

Plan to attend two more meetings after everyone knows.

When you leave a group it's like a finger leaving a hand. The hand will be upset. There will be some separation anxiety. When you let people know in advance they get used to the idea, and feel comfortable talking to you.

If you simply stand and say *"Wanna let you know this is my last meeting."* people will be so uncomfortable they won't even say good-bye to you at the end of the meeting. Then your feelings will be hurt, and you won't stay in touch with them, and all the time and energy you've put into building this network will be wasted.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Simply let the members know that you're leaving . . . but this time, the time after next . . . and they'll adjust, smile, wish you well, and introduce you to a few other people who can boost your success.

That was worth it.

## bonus script #1 tell them how you benefitted from them

As you're calling each person, think of something you got from them. It could be

- the way they welcomed you when you first joined, and introduced you to other members
- some information they shared that you used and benefitted from
- a referral they gave you, that resulted in a new client
- their sponsorship when you wanted a board position
- remembering your birthday last year
- entertaining your young daughter when you had to bring her to a meeting
- a heads up on a seminar you enjoyed
- good advice when you had a problem.

Tell them how they gave you benefit. That is the best thank you, and a way to insure they will feel comfortable staying in touch, and referring business to you.

## bonus script #2 give them an easy way to stay in touch with you

Think of a way that you can be a future benefit to each person you're speaking with.

When Debra Carpenter left the business referral group she'd been a member of for 12 years she said *"As people join who I would be a resource for, feel welcome to introduce us over 3-way lunch."*

Yowza! Debra gave each member a reason to stay in touch with her. And they have.

Notice she didn't say "give them my number" she said "you + them + me." That's staying in touch.

When chiropractor Smith left the group he announced it during the meeting. He said *"I'm just too busy to keep attending, but if you're ever out and about with nothing to do, feel welcome to stop by my office and hang out."*

He doesn't have time for the meeting, but he has free time in the office to hang? Right.

## have the conversations

Starting with the president, then the rest of the officers, speak with as many people as you can before and after the next meeting. (You might even call the president and the officers earlier in the week, since they will be busy with their roles at the meeting.)

Say:

I want to let you know that I'm leaving at the end of the month. My biggest client has asked me to spend Tuesdays on-site for the next year.

This will be a 20% increase for my business, but it also means I won't be able to attend this meeting on Tuesdays.

I want to thank you for giving me great advice when I needed to fire an employee. Your script made it comfortable for both of us, and I've used it a couple of times since then. Learning to fire fast and effectively has been one of the keys to increasing my success as a business person.

I know you're the chair of next year's fundraising campaign. Keep me on your list, I'm a fan and I'm looking forward to participating.

## make the announcement

In associations where every person speaks at every meeting you may also want to make a group announcement.

Do that during the announcements time. Do not include the information during your normal role in the meeting. If you have a choice, if there are announcements at the beginning and at the end of the meeting, give this announcement at the end.

It sounds like this:

As most of you know (by this time everyone you want to get future referrals from should already know) next week will be my last meeting.

My biggest client has asked me to spend Tuesdays on-site for the next year.

So I will be working, and I will be drinking coffee, but I won't be here, drinking coffee with you.

I look forward to keeping in touch with each of you, and I'll continue to let people know this is a great organization for them to join to build their business.

The following week use the same script, replacing "next week with be my last meeting" with "today is my last meeting".

## reach out

Beginning about a month later reach out to one member of the group every week.

It could be a birthday call, or a lunch invitation or an email mentioning that you met someone they know.

When you reach out you make it comfortable for them to stay in touch with you, *to give referrals to you*.

Reaching out also means they'll talk about you at the meeting. It's almost like you're still there—and that's a good thing.

You made an investment in time and in money to build a network.

Leaving the group profitably means your investment keeps paying dividends.

That's good business.

coda:  
leaving when you're a leader

Leadership brings credibility in a fast and powerful way because leadership allows you show that you do what you say you will.

Naturally, people make the assumption that your word is good. Because you do what you say you will as a leader, they trust you would do what you say if they referred one of their clients to you.

Or not.

So leaving without fulfilling the term is a credibility cut. You're not doing what you said you would, combined with other people having added tasks because of you.

The antidote to this is time.  
Give the president time to fill your role.  
Give the person assuming your role time to learn it.

For a group that meets weekly, at least a month. For a group that meets monthly, three months.

you're leaving.  
you don't get to tell the  
people staying what to do

Since you will no longer be a part of the group, you will not be on the nominating committee to choose a successor.

But it is gracious of you to present suggestions.

You might say, "Dale is good at organizing, and was on the committee last year."

When you give a behavior and show experience your suggestion makes the president see options instead of feeling overwhelmed by your loss.

Leadership includes foresight and preparation. Life happens. Some day you may have to leave a leadership position. What if you prepared for that? What if you always invited a member (or two) to work closely with you? Not only would you be strengthening the organization, you would be training a successor, and if another officer had to leave mid-term you could nominate this associate who has been working closely with you. It's called bench strength. It's good.

when you leave.  
leave everything

Don't assume that it's your role to train the person who will replace you.

Training is like that children's game where the first person whispers "*We're having a party next week*" and the last person hears "*I eat chocolate pudding in tennis shoes.*" The half-life on information transfer is short.

But you will have knowledge and materials to transfer.

Don't make anyone ask you for it.

- Arrange your schedule for their convenience,
- meet in person,
- hand off all of the materials you have, and
- explain how you've been keeping records.

Later, if you find another book or think of something you missed, it is your responsibility to deliver it.

If you must leave, leave well.  
Leaving well builds credibility.

What if I get fired.  
do I still have to do all this?

Only if you want a new job.

The members of the association are your network. Right now, when you've been active, is the best time to use it. Right now, when you're credible, is when they'll feel most comfortable endorsing you to their clients who are hiring.

Print personal business cards so they have current contact information. Bring resumes. Ask for suggestions.

Talk about your strengths. Know what you're looking for. *"Anything with a paycheck, I just need a paycheck."* isn't going to induce endorsement. *"I'm a natural project manager. Your client who's so busy they don't have time to talk to you wants to know I'm available."*

So, can I tell the group I'm looking for a new job?

One at a time.

Your goal is to show that you are credible. Saying *"The company paying my membership, the company I'm promoting, is lousy."* isn't professional. Or loyal. Or attractive.

When speaking with a member over coffee or lunch you can mention what you're looking for—you could say *"This company is very good, but my goals include management, and that isn't available to me here. If you have a client who's ready to hire their first Sales Manager, I'd appreciate being considered."* Your conversation partner will ask for more information; that means information about *what* you are looking for, not information about *why* you're looking.

There's nothing professional about complaining.

Can I keep attending while I'm in job search?

Ask.

The adage—it's easier to beg forgiveness than to ask permission—is almost never true.

Asking, anything, is a powerful way to show that you respect the person you're asking and the organization you're asking about.

Part of the answer may include who paid for membership, and when it expires. Part of the answer may relate to the organization's purpose. And part of the answer may be traditional.

Asking will make you look respectful and professional.

That's good.

I'm going through chemo.  
I just don't have the  
energy for this

You're right.

And this is the reason you've built a network—to support you, to give you strength.

Here's how to use it.

On a day, at a time when you're feeling pretty good, call one person from the association and share with them what is going on.

Say "I want to tell you what is happening with me right now, so you don't think I just dropped out. Is this a good time for you to talk?"

Tell them as much as you feel comfortable sharing. Then tell them what you're comfortable having other people know. You might say, "Of course people will know that I'm going through chemo, but I'd prefer not to share the type of cancer."

Ask them to let everyone know. You could say, "I really don't have the energy to call everyone. Could you please let people know, as you see them, that I'm still around, and I'll be back."

let people know  
how to support you

Be clear whether you do or do not want phone calls; whether email would be encouraging or sap your strength. When Alan Weiss' twin granddaughters were born four months prematurely he was clear: "Please do not call us. We spend all of our time at the hospital, and when we get home we need to rest. Returning phone calls, even listening to phone messages, is simply more than we can handle regardless of how encouraging you mean to be. Do not call us."

When Martha Lanier was diagnosed with breast cancer she set up a blog on Caring Bridge.com where she or her children or her husband could post updates.

When Susan and Bob Bershinski's son Daniel was injured in Afghanistan they chose a few people to have direct communication with their many networks. Annie DeRose-Broekert is my liaison. Annie emails support updates. Annie shared Susan and Bob's request not to call and not to drop by with chicken casseroles.

You've built a network. Use it.

Show support

Pam belongs to a group that enforces attendance and allows substitution. Anticipating that during chemo treatments attendance would be difficult for her, Mike prepared a clipboard with 10 weeks outlined.

At the meeting he announced that Pam's plans to return meant she'd need a substitute. Then he asked members to sign up to get a sub for Pam just one of the 10 weeks. The clipboard was full before it got around the table.

And just like that, the group showed their support for Pam and their respect for the policies of the organization.

What if I don't like these people, and I really don't care if I ever see them again.

People know people.

At a Gala Dinner Jill, seated two from my left, and Bob, seated on my right, discovered that Jill's cousin's husband is Bob's best friend at work—even though they work from different states. Bob knew stories about Jill, he just didn't know (until now) that this was the Jill he knew stories about.

Of course I could give you more examples, but, you've already experienced them.

Leaving well is a sign of respect, to yourself.

Regardless of how you feel about the people in the group give them a reason to remember you as professional.

You're not doing this for them; you're doing it for yourself.

Can one of my employees or someone else from my company take my place?

Ask.

In many organizations there is a process for transferring membership.

If you transfer your membership to someone else you are still leaving. So use the process to let members know the good news why, add information about the person who will be stepping in, and be at the first meeting to introduce them personally.

Pave the way by suggesting how they can volunteer, sharing tips on the group's etiquette and introducing them to a mentor.

Make the transition easy by letting members know the new person's strengths and suggesting where they could effectively participate.

What if I'm leaving because someone did me wrong. Who should I tell?

No one.

You're taking your bat and ball and leaving.

If you stay, *and a professional would*, then you it is your responsibility tell someone, so the same thing doesn't happen to another member. Here's how:

In writing, on your letterhead, tell what happened. Just what happened. That's all. Say *"I did this, and they did that."* and sign your name. DO NOT TELL THE BOARD WHAT TO DO. Just report the facts.

Hand the letter to the board member in charge of membership, or to the president. Say, *"I had an experience I want the board to know about."* That's it.

You have a responsibility to let officers know in a way they can use. You don't have a responsibility for the outcome. If you tell someone confidentially, they can't use the information. If they do, it's gossip. The facts, in writing, means everyone discussing the situation will be on the same page. That's professional. Of you.