

Q I feel I've reached a crossroads at work. Should I jump before I'm pushed?

MAKE YOUR CHOICE

Annie Stewart suggests a six-step "CHOICE" process for defining and pursuing your calling:

- 1. Clarify your strongest skills.** What gives you joy, and what environment do you feel most comfortable in?
- 2. Healing & health.** Do you need to make peace with the past before moving on? If you feel you have to "prove something" it can impede your progress.
- 3. Options.** Brainstorm them with other people.
- 4. Information.** Seek out what you need to make a decision – look for jobs, people and situations that inspire you.
- 5. Commit.** And discuss your decision with affected partners.
- 6. Enact your decision.** Be mindful to sustain it without moving into the "shadow" side.

AS THE working year grinds down to the Christmas holidays, many of us are feeling downright weary; looking forward to the break (if we get one) so we can recharge the batteries. But some of us are beyond weary, brooding over yet another year wasted in a job that's going nowhere, feeling stuck in a rut, wondering "is that all there is?"

Maybe it is time to go. Di Percy of Vogel Percy & Co, an advisor to boards and CEOs, says signs it is time to move on include feeling lost, bored, restless, in limbo or tied down. "They lose the feel of their own journey," she says, referring to one CEO she dealt with who told her he didn't want "to become dependant on the company".

It's best to act on these signals before others act on them for you. Percy says people don't usually see the warning signs that they're about to get the boot – except in hindsight. This is as true for CEOs as anyone else. "CEOs need to have time set aside to reflect, and they're not

rewarded for that," she says. But if they're perceptive they might notice that members of their executive team and board aren't responding to them as warmly as they used to. Executives who have outgrown their jobs can turn into meddling, interfering bosses. Team meetings that once included fiery discussions might have degenerated into something more like stony silence.

Percy recommends visualising three personal "horizon" levels (adapted from a McKinsey framework for businesses). The first is six months to two years out – the specific job you're working towards. The second is five years out – the role that inspires you but is beyond your

current capacity. The third is what you'll remember on your deathbed – your life's purpose. Horizons one and two change often, so the key is to start with visualising horizon three and work backwards.

That far horizon is sometimes referred to as one's calling – that constant itching to do something bigger than what you're doing now. Sympatico Coaching's Annie Stewart has done her PhD thesis on how leaders find and follow their callings. Her study, "A Call to Lead", looked at 60 mainly Australian leaders spanning the corporate, not-for-profit and religious sectors and found some commonality in the language they used to describe their callings.

Even among profit-driven executives, words associated with "giving back" and "leaving a legacy" dominated. But Stewart says many CEOs she interviewed were reticent about expressing a higher-purpose calling out of fear of being seen as softies. This reluctance will no doubt ebb in future as more high-flyers embrace social entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility.

Stewart says one of the biggest things her research revealed is the need for patience. "Sixty per cent of people knew their calling before they turned 20," she says. But it was often another 20 years before they fulfilled their dream. She says a typical career progression started with university, then went through experimentation with a variety of roles to build experience, followed by specialisation in some area of expertise. The 40s were the natural time to examine this question, she says, and often followed early parenthood or finally getting personal finances under control.

People who are working at their calling are powerfully motivated and seemingly perpetually energised. But beware: there is a "shadow" side to such focus. Stewart says the drive of a calling is sometimes used to justify dysfunctional behaviours, including a tendency towards obsession, narcissism, self-absorption, self-righteousness, control and arrogance. There is always a risk that a passionate leader will morph into an egotistical zealot.

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