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How To Quit Your Job With Class

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How should I do this? ZVYAGINTSEV-UNSPLASH

By Dianna Booher—

Raise your hand if a parent warned you, “If you can’t say something nice about somebody, don’t say anything at all.”

The accuracy rating on this warning falls higher than most “truths.” Many employees have learned the hard way that shooting off a nasty resignation to a boss often comes back to haunt them at some point in their career.

Just recently, a former employee emailed to ask if I would serve as a reference. He’d finished three interviews with a Fortune 100 company and was facing the final hurdle to a job he wanted badly.

I agreed to give a reference. Within a few hours, his potential boss phoned to ask about Jim’s prior work at our firm.

As I responded to the hiring manager’s questions, Jim’s demeanor and comments during our layoff conversation 22 years earlier flashed in my mind: The economic forecast looked bleak at the time. Our clients were calling to wriggle out of their contracts, citing cashflow problems. They needed to stop the bleeding. Loosening the noose around the necks of those clients made us feel good to help in their time of need—but eventually, the drain put our own firm at risk.

For that reason, I had called Jim (a thirty-something with a wife and baby on the way) into my office to tell him that we needed to lay him off for the foreseeable future. I braced for the worst reaction. Instead, he nodded calmly. “I understand. I know things in the industry aren’t going well now. I overhear the phone conversations our reps are having.”

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I interrupted with apologies for having to give him this bad layoff news. But Jim continued, “I understand. . . . Totally. . . . It’s okay. I’ve learned so much working here. It’s been great. Don’t worry about us—we’ll be fine. I’ll find something else.”

Jim said his goodbyes to coworkers in the spirit of someone who’d decided to leave the firm for a better offer. Calmly, confidently, kindly.

So as I stood holding the phone to give a reference two decades later, I remembered Jim’s departing comments. I’m sure that pleasant conversation in a bad situation colored my comments to his potential boss.

He got the new job.

No doubt, I’m not alone in realizing that some words and behaviors are not easily erased. Life is too short for nasty comments to stay underground. They surface and get around. And such comments can affect references, referrals, potential partnerships, competitor treatment, and coworker relationships for years.

What’s Gossip Got to Do With It? Nothing Good!

Although not everyone holds the power to give a negative reference or referral, most everyone on the planet has occasion to gossip—or not.

A ubiquitous movie scene illustrates the damage well. The subject of the gossip happens to be in the bathroom stall when gossipers enter the room. They chat about the “awful,” “lazy,” “ugly,” “incompetent,” or “selfish” jerk behind the stall door. After the

gossipers leave, the victim emerges from the bathroom stall either vowing to set the record straight or vowing to get even.

BETA

Enemies for life.

Consider the staying power of social media. Who hasn't posted something they wish they'd never said, clicked, or shared?

The one exception to this warning about what to say or not to say: Criminal or unethical behavior. As a responsible citizen, neighbor, or employee, on occasion you may need to report the "un-nice," inappropriate action to an authority. That's your duty.

But for all other negative thoughts that you're tempted to utter in a bad job situation, think again. Just don't open your mouth about it!

How to Leave a Job With Class—And an Open Door

- **Don't threaten; just do.** Once you make up your mind to find another job, do it. Just don't talk about it until you have an offer and accept. Otherwise, your current boss may read such comments as threats or bargaining chips.
- **State simply what position you're resigning, effective on a specific date.** If you're going directly to a new job, it's a good idea to state what new position you're accepting. It's only common sense that your boss and team will be curious. Plus, word will eventually get around and they'll find out. It leaves a better taste in their mouth if you forgo the "secrecy" game.
- **Offer a reason.** Although you're not obligated to give a reason for your departure, adding your reason serves several purposes. It's the official line others will share rather than

providing “hearsay” to those who ask. That reason can be vague, of course: “To pursue a life-long interest and hobby.” “To help out with elderly parents.” “To provide oversight on a significant community project.” “To participate meaningfully in a nonprofit cause.” “To seek a position more in line with my current interests and training.”

- **Close with a goodwill comment.** You can offer good wishes for the continued growth of the organization, or good wishes about an ongoing project you’ve been affiliated with. Or state your gratitude for something you’ve learned or enjoyed during your tenure. With such a goodwill closing, you’re leaving a door open to a variety of future opportunities.

Of course, when leaving an organization, the furthest thing from your mind may be a return. But you never know when your new employer may merge with the old. Or when you’ll need the cooperation of your competitor. Or when your former boss may become a customer. All solid reasons to hold your head high and exit with class.

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, including *Communicate Like a Leader*. She helps organizations communicate clearly. Follow her at BooherResearch.com and [@DiannaBooher](https://twitter.com/DiannaBooher).

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