

# It's Hard to Leave

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

"I finally realized that my job had become my best friend. It's very hard to leave your best friend."

I watched the expressive face of a fantastic leader as she shared her personal feelings about leaving the executive suite. Several other CEOs in the room were hanging on to her every word.

These executives were at various stages of career and life. Some had left their jobs two or three years ago, some were just getting ready to depart and some had several years to go. Although they were from different industries and backgrounds (some corporate, some nonprofit and some military), they had a lot in common.

And they were all there to learn from and help one another.

"It seemed like I was getting promoted every few years. I loved the company, my co-workers and our customers. Going to work was always a joy for me," she said, sighing. "The time just flew by and then one day, it was time to leave. It hurt."

Life transitions are usually far more difficult than we imagine. It's easy to talk about letting go - it's just hard to do it.

I have worked with many CEOs. Although they almost all say they are different and that this transition won't be hard for them, they really aren't that different, and the transition is almost always tougher than they thought it would be.

To people who have never been there, this concern probably seems insane. After all, retired CEOs usually have plenty of money. They wouldn't have to work again for the rest of their lives - they already "won the lottery." What are they worried about? They can sleep late, live on the beach, improve their golf scores and play all day.

None of the former CEOs whom I have worked with, however, have any desire to just sleep late, live on the beach, improve their golf scores and play all day. If they wanted to just retire, they could have done it - years earlier. Instead, they want to continue to make a difference in the world and to find meaning through making a contribution.

Preparing for departure is one task that executives don't do very well. One of my friends knows he is going to have to retire as CEO in about a year, and he has done nothing to prepare for this moment. I asked him, "If you knew that your business was going to radically change in one year, would you plan for this eventuality?" He laughed and replied, "Of course!" I went on, "Your life is more important than your business. Maybe you should start planning the rest of your life."

In some ways, the military does a better job preparing leaders for transitions than the private sector. One top general said that transition is just "part of life" in the military. He also said the

best officers spend the first quarter of their tour of duty initiating plans and new ideas, the middle on execution and the final quarter preparing for transition.

No matter where you are in your career, it is good to think about how leaving is going to feel. Time passes very quickly. Every executive I have met is amazed at how fast the years seemed to fly by.

Don't kid yourself - people are living a lot longer today than they used to, and they are a lot healthier at 65. If you have the drive and energy to become a successful leader, it is unlikely that these traits will immediately stop when you leave your company.

I have uncovered only six variables that matter as we face transition: health, wealth, relationships, meaning, contribution and happiness. If something else matters, I have never heard any executive mention it. Most of the leaders that I know have their health, they have enough wealth to live comfortably, and most have good relationships with family and friends.

That leaves meaning, contribution and happiness, which are closely connected. The happiest "transitioned" executives I have met are still making a contribution to the world, they are finding meaning in what they do and finding contentment in what they do today - not just reflecting on what they used to be.

Think about "life after work." How can you make a contribution? How can you find meaning? What will make you happy? You might have 20 or more years to live after your primary work is finished. How can you make this time count for yourself and the people around you?

Now is a good time to start planning.