

## **The CEO Clock**

By Kenneth A. Shaw

Most of us in leadership positions don't have the luxury of deciding when it is time. We serve at the pleasure of a Board of Directors, which offers us advice and support, and, if the Boards is strong, lets us know how we are doing.

This honest feedback helps CEOs improve performance and better understand when new leadership is needed. Of course, some business leaders work for family businesses or other privately held enterprises. Even then, customers, employees and loved ones are there to help provide help in dealing with the question: "Is it time?"

None of us can or should make this decision independent of those around us. There are ways to help you answer the question.

First, if you know yourself well, you will have a strong sense about how things are going.

Ask yourself these questions:

Am I still effective?

Do I still have a strong passion for what I do?

If I step down, do I have meaningful ways to spend my time?

Am I prepared to support new leadership without getting in the way, even when things are being done that I don't like?

The answer to the last two questions often impedes our objectivity when dealing with the first two. If you can't imagine a life without the leadership job or accept that a new leader will have different or possibly better approaches to do the job, you will find ways to persuade yourself that now isn't the time.

And you can't be expected to be entirely objective no matter your level of self-awareness.

Having a good feedback loop is the best answer. Trusted staff, colleagues and loved ones are a good place to start. For staff and colleagues, the question shouldn't be, "Should I step down?" but rather, "How am I doing?"

For loved ones, it can be much more personal. But staff and colleagues in particular may not want to tell it to you straight. After all, many have a stake in keeping things at an even keel; often they are afraid to hurt your feelings or incur your anger if they are too honest.

Another approach is to have a coach, someone outside the organization you can talk to off-the-record. If you don't bring up the question, a good coach will find a way to bring it into the conversation.

Your coach might do an informal 360-degree evaluation, interviewing key staff and other employees. A few questions will be sufficient. What are the major challenges your organization faces? What kind of leadership is needed to face these challenges?

After you have received confidential feedback from your coach, you can then ask yourself, again, if the passion is still there for what needs to be accomplished.

If the answer is yes, then develop a plan to move yourself and the organization forward. If you are ambivalent or the answer is no, then it is time to prepare for succession.

As a part of your succession thinking, know that you should be there for the new person, to be helpful but not in the way. An office next to the new leader no matter how small is out of bounds. You need to be available for calls of consultation but not so close in proximity that your shadow dominates the working space.

How can you be helpful and best serve the organization in your new role? Can you give advice when asked without nagging or indicating disapproval? And if the new person, by everyone's standards, isn't working out, how will the organization deal with this unhappy situation? Will you be involved? Hopefully not.

And you need to think about what you will want to do with your new life because others will be too busy getting ready for the new person to help you decide.

Your organization benefits when you have done your best to ensure its advancement. When you have decided at the right time when it is best for you to move on, prepared your colleagues for new leadership and volunteered to help but have not interfered.

That's a tall order, but who ever said leadership was easy?

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