PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How to Know When It's Time to Step Down From a Leadership Role

BY KRISTEN TRIBE

UPDATED: JULY 21, 2025 | PUBLISHED: AUGUST 18, 2025

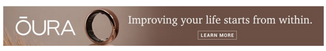


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Engage In Self-Reflection
Seek Support
Leave A Legacy
Activate A Plan





"Should I stay or should I go now?" Although the phrase brings to mind The Clash's punk rock classic, it's a weighty question for leaders contemplating a career move.

A record number of CEOs left their roles last year, according to the 2024 Global CEO Turnover report by Russell Reynolds Associates (RRA), a global leadership advisory firm. The analysis, which tracks CEO departures from 13 global indices, indicates 202 CEOs left their roles in 2024, up 9% from 2023.

RRA broadly attributes the global increase to investor activism and technological change, but it was also likely a deeply personal decision for each of those leaders. Whether you helm a worldwide powerhouse, a Main Street staple or a treasured family business, the decision to leave is influenced by a multitude of factors requiring careful consideration.



Engage in self-reflection

Ashwini Nadkarni, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says the decision to step down should come after a process of self-reflection.

"I think it's helpful for leaders to ask themselves a set of questions to arrive at that conclusion and take some time to be thoughtful when they assess their decision," she says. "Some important questions to ask oneself include..."

- How have I grown?
- What skills did I gain?
- What have I achieved?
- How have I contributed to other people's development or success?
- Am I still professionally fulfilled in this position?

Nadkarni explains that those answers then must be weighed against the leader's goals. If a leader is considering retirement, these answers could determine if they've accomplished all they hoped for during their career. If a leader is not considering retirement, but instead contemplating a career move, they must examine their answers and ask if their current position and company will enable them to continue growing and help others do the same.

"Leaders have to ask themselves, 'Is there that space for me?'" Nadkarni says. "The other question that they have to ask themselves is, 'Will my departure create space for others?'... There's that tipping point where our growth compromises the growth of others."

Nadkarni says it's also important for a leader to consider how they're handling the challenges of their position. What was once exciting and invigorating may now be exhausting and overwhelming.

"People can end up becoming increasingly cynical or experience emotional exhaustion, and so when that point comes, it's a great time to hand over the role to somebody else because you know that they'll apply a new energy," she says.

Although every leader would prefer to exit on their own terms, sometimes external stressors lead to a departure. Nadkarni says if a leader is consistently receiving negative feedback, it may be time to make a change. Unexpected life events such as health problems or the death of a spouse can also require a person to leave a position.

Seek support

Even if all signs are pointing to resignation or retirement, it can still be a difficult transition, especially if it's a long-held position or a role in a family business. Nadkarni says seeking support from friends and family, consulting with a career coach or seeking mental health support can help leaders reconcile their personal emotions and the company's needs.

If a person is "not in a place of acceptance about the fact that the organization and the individual are moving in two different directions... to get to that place of acceptance, it probably requires some additional reflection," she says.

Nadkarni acknowledges that leadership changes in family businesses can sometimes be especially stressful or intense due to the emotions that come into play with family dynamics.

"There are actually organizational psychiatrists and behavioral health specialists who specialize in that specific area of focus, where they consult families in that setting," she says. "Seeking out advice from such a person who's had that experience and expertise in those specific situations is important."

Leave a legacy

As leaders prepare to leave a role, they may want to solidify their legacy to ensure their time spent was meaningful.

To do so, a leader should first identify their values, which will in turn define their sense of legacy. For example, many people value relationships within the business or visibility of specific projects or work, so Nadkarni advises shoring up those things in the months leading up to an exit.

"I think most people would probably agree that a legacy as a leader is certainly defined by your impact on your team and mentorship that you've had, the career advancement that you've facilitated for others," she says. "Continuing to amplify that over time, I think that that is really critical."

She says leaders can build on that outside their role and continue to share their expertise in their next professional chapter through consultant work, writing and teaching, or even "creating your own content platform for people or exploring things like social media as a way to offer that information." She adds, "A lot of times people will move from a leadership role to teaching at a college."

She also notes that many of the skills used at work are also needed in nonprofit organizations and can be shared through volunteer work.

Activate a plan

Nadkarni suggests, if the leader is leaving on their own terms, to allow at least a year for the exit process and transition to a successor. It's important to allow enough time to talk to key stakeholders and help develop the incoming leadership team.

"Having those meetings and ensuring you have a good runway... that's key," she says.

Although the idea of leaving a leadership role can be overwhelming and the exit process can be exhausting, it's best to be proactive. Otherwise, those Clash lyrics may come back to haunt you: "If I go there will be trouble, and if I stay it will be double."

By planning ahead and working thoughtfully through the transition process, you will not only promote and facilitate the company's next chapter but also blaze a new trail for yourself.

Photo by Prostock-studio/Shutterstock.com



Kristen Tribe
Kristen Tribe is the special projects editor forSUCCESS+magazine and other digital projects at SUCCESS®.



Get SUCCESS® Magazine PLUS 80+ Hours of Exclusive Training (& More!) to Multiply Your Earning Potential

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Copyright © 2025 SUCCESS Magazine. All rights reserved.