

Chapter 1 – Should I Stay or Should I Go?

I'll try anything once, twice if I like it, three times to make sure. – Mae West

In economics, there is a term called *barriers to exit* that refers to the many hurdles to leave a market, sector, or offering. A company with a dying product is considering discontinuing the line; but the cost to do so is prohibitive. A termination fee is a barrier to exit. It will cost you money to end a contract—make it more painful to leave than to stay. Sometimes barriers to exit are so high that the barrier outweighs the potential gain from moving on. I faced a big barrier to exit in my career.

In college, I picked the major that I thought would get me closest to what my mom was—an amazing person and leader, surrounded by people who respected her and worked for her over long periods of time. The closest thing at my college was human resources. Recruiting, leadership, retention. It sounded great. It was a major in *people*, right? It didn't take long for that dream to turn dark.

Two years after graduating, I was telling a guy who had been with the company for 35 years that his job was gone. We were closing the plant. Shutting the entire operation down. Slimming down to get the rest ready for sale. We were all going to be let go. The leadership team had talked about the possibility for weeks, yet this guy was shocked. He was angry. He was mad at the company. He was mad at the leaders. He was mad at the venture capitalist company that was trying to sell us. And he focused all his anger on me—the closest person to him telling him news that he dreaded hearing. He screamed at me. He pounded his fists on the table. I thought he was going to jump across the table and attack me. Chris, who worked in the next office came in to help the employee leave. After they left, I looked down at my list and scanned the names of the remaining 24 people I had to repeat that process with. It wasn't a good day for me. It wasn't a good day for people in general. Not a great example of why I got into human resources. Yet, even after that, I stayed in the field.

I climbed the ladder. I got my first manager position. Then a regional role. Soon I was leading the HR function for large divisions of key sectors of the business. I managed more terminations, employee relations nightmares, downsizing, rightsizing, and lawsuits. I stayed in a field that I didn't really love because I felt like I couldn't leave. I

had a bachelor's degree in HR and a master's degree in HR and, by that time, 20 years in the field. The thought of leaving this expertise was a massive barrier to exit. So, I got good at mixing it up.

To break the monotony of the job, I changed companies at a regular clip. To stay for four years at one location was a long tenure. I had to keep moving to refresh my reserves, or else the drain on my emotional bank would begin to sap me. Because I had a knack at writing my own résumé and preparing for interviews, I'd land a new job with ease. I just wouldn't stay very long. I found areas that I loved at the fringe of HR and would pour my heart into them, like being on a national diversity council or stabilizing a market for an HR consulting firm. No one could tell that I wasn't happy. Then I worked for a boss who could tell.