

When to Stay or Go

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Making good decisions involves considering risks, benefits, feasibility, and values, but what if no alternative is clearly better? Have you ever been stuck making a decision to stay with something or move on? Maybe a decision to stay with or leave a job? Or to stick with an existing strategy, vendor, or market? Or stay in a relationship? Or remodel a house? Some decisions are straightforward, but others can seem like a toss-up. Existing circumstances can always be improved, but not always bad enough to create a clear choice.

Many people default to staying with what they have. They prefer to make the best of their circumstances. They work for the same employer for many years. They are loyal to their favorite brands. They maintain long-term relationships. They spend time with the same friends. They stay with their technology as long as possible. When they encounter frustrations, they try to work through them. They are typically patient, calm, positive, and grateful. They find the good in what they have until it becomes unbearably painful. They are stable, preferring to stay with the status quo than make a change.

Others are quicker to move on. They have a lower tolerance for frustrating circumstances and people. When things don't go as planned they tend to focus on what is wrong instead of what is right. They complain more often. They are quicker to change jobs, careers, and relationships. They seem to regularly change their mind, hair, glasses, automobiles, pastime, phone, address, or something. They are not as patient. They get bored easily. They have a lower threshold for dealing with adversity.

Which approach is better – sticking with something or moving on? The answer of course is “it depends”. There are some circumstances better kept and some better left. You only know after a decision is made. Even then people never know for sure because they make the best of their choice. Few have the awareness, humility, and unbiased perspective required to acknowledge a bad decision.

What do you prefer? When circumstances suggest a change is needed, do you default to staying or going? Do you generally stay with what you have or do you choose change?

While change provides an opportunity for learning and development, it doesn't guarantee the benefits will outweigh the liabilities. Sticking with current circumstances can be the better option. The green grass on the other side of the fence can turn out to be artificial turf. Improving something can turn out better than giving up on it. However, moving on can be the better choice too. When the horse and buggy was being displaced by the automobile, moving into the automobile business was a better choice. When money invested into a house remodel doesn't produce the desired outcome, buying a new house can be the better option.

Perhaps you're frustrated with your current circumstances. You either made a poor decision or unforeseeable events happened outside of your control. It doesn't matter. You are not productive, advancing, or happy. You've considered all the variables, yet you still can't decide. Do you stay the course and try to make things better, or do you change course? Or do you wait for someone else to make the decision for you? If you decide to decide, do you follow your instinct? Your feelings? Or do you research the facts and make a logical decision? If people are involved, do you assume they will or won't change? If clients, markets, economies, or competitors are involved, do you assume they will continue on their current trajectory? Or should you pin your hopes on increased funding, new management, competitor miscues, or perhaps better weather? Answers to these questions determine the fate of organizations and lives every day. They cause great companies to become mediocre and mediocre ones to become great. They cause people great joy as well as grief. These are life changing decisions with significant consequences.

To help get the best outcome possible when stuck on a significant decision to stay or go, here are three points to consider:

- Are you primarily leaving what you have or going to something new? If you are primarily leaving what you have, be careful. What you have or don't have may be more about how you see it than objective reality. You may be giving too much mindshare to what isn't working at the expense of what is. It could be that you are running from something that you can't run from—you. If you have repeatedly changed jobs, you could have been unlucky. Or you don't know how to pick your jobs. Or the problem you keep trying to leave is you rather than your employer. If after repeated failed attempts at something, turn your attention to yourself before choosing to move on. Either change what you are looking for and how you look for it, or change yourself. Rather than focus on alternatives outside yourself, focus on the alternatives inside yourself. The needed change might be within you rather than outside of you.
- If you are primarily going to something new, be careful too. Puppies and kittens are really cute, but can become the same old dog or cat that you grew tired of before. Try to objectively visualize your new circumstances over the long-term after the new wears off. Assess whether things will really be that much better. Don't merely trade one set of problems for another. Be realistic about the benefits of the change. Consider how likely the benefits are to sustain themselves. If the benefits are likely to deteriorate over time, ensure they still justify the change.
- Changes in circumstances often depend on changes in people. If you've made the needed changes in yourself and are now counting on other people to change for your circumstances to get better, consider the facts:
 - People (aka bosses, organizations, spouses, friends, partners, suppliers) can change, but that doesn't mean they will.
 - People who do change typically have a track record of change. You can see their growth path. Not just in their professional titles or bank accounts, but in their learning. They have made improvements in their approaches, methods, relationships, attitude, style, and knowledge. They read self-help books. They are intentional about attending classes and seminars. They seek feedback. They value criticism. They work with mentors, coaches, counselors, and trainers. They see themselves on a continuous improvement journey and spend considerable time, money, and energy improving themselves.
 - People who don't change typically don't because they aren't willing to put in the effort. They prefer to complain, blame, make excuses, and talk about other people than pursue new ideas or experiences. They tend to stay on the knowing side of the knowing-doing gap. They spend much of their discretionary time being entertained rather than educated. If they read, they probably read fiction. If they are online, they are probably on social media. They put fun, convenient, easy, and urgent in front of important. They prefer the status quo. They are generally closed-minded.

Change can be good or bad. You don't know until you make the change. If your decision is essentially a toss-up, don't leave something unless you have done everything within your control to make it better. Change for the sake of change is no better than a coin toss. You might as well go to a casino roulette table and put everything you have on red or black. A preschooler could just as easily make that decision. Make the change when you clearly have something very appealing to go to and you have used sound judgement. If you have done your best to make what you currently have work by impartial standards, then when you move on you can do so based on the opportunity ahead without regret. You know you did what you could. If in contrast you simply leave something because you are frustrated, it will be an even unhappier day should you realize that what you hoped to leave stayed with you.

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