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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “A Counterproposal”

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In the August issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the management situation below. Thanks so much for the terrific response to this study—I only wish we had room to include them all! I’ve included below those that struck me as particularly interesting analyses, plus excerpts from others that add new elements to the discussion. (Responses have also been edited for space and clarity.) At the end is the real-life conclusion of the situation. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

A COUNTERPROPOSAL

Susan enjoys her boss and her job at Century Life, but feels stuck. She is a career ASA, the only one at her small company. She hasn’t received a promotion for several years, while of course all of the FSA-track members of the actuarial department have been steadily moving up. Her immediate boss (Alex, who runs the actuarial department) has always been very supportive, but she doesn’t feel that the chief actuary (Alex’s boss, Thomas) values her for a higher-level role.

Susan gets a job offer from another company in the area,

and decides to accept it. When she goes to Alex to turn in her resignation, he asks her about the job. As they talk, he tells her that he would normally be quick to congratulate her and wish her well, but he doesn’t get the sense that she’s excited about this move.

They discuss her current and potential future situation for an hour and a half, and Susan shares her concerns. At the end, Alex tells Susan that it feels to him like this isn’t the right move for her, but that he will respect whatever decision she decides to make. He tells her he will talk to Thomas about a promotion if she decides to stay.

If you were Susan, what would you do?

There is a common perception that one should never accept a counteroffer prompted by turning in a resignation, so when I presented this case I worried that almost all responses would simply say Susan should leave. Instead, the vast majority thought there were good reasons why Susan should at least consider her decision carefully. Here are two responses that concisely capture the essence of the “should leave” argument:

Actuary 1

Unless Susan’s really not thrilled about the new job, she should go. Even if Alex is successful in getting her a promotion, it’s not a good sign that it takes threatening to leave in order to earn recognition. Most people I have known who have been through this scenario have wound up leaving anyway even after the promotion. It just takes a little longer.

Actuary 2

Thrilled or not, the reason Susan sought a new role (presumably undergoing multiple rounds of interviews) has not changed and probably will not change, unless Alex and Thomas have an epiphany. Susan should thank Alex for being a considerate manager and move on.

One’s career is best shaped in an environment where they are “valued,” which translates to empowered or “allowed” to perform, and then recognized and rewarded accordingly for that performance. I expect most “career ASAs” know this only too well.

Here are three interesting perspectives on Susan’s choices:

Actuary 3

Susan needs to be careful that she isn’t trading a position that will demand more of her time even though it appears to offer more of a career opportunity (but isn’t proven that it will). The sacrifice could be less time at home to chase what could be a better work opportunity.

Susan needs to figure out if she is running away from something or running toward some-

thing. If running away, it is likely that the issues and problems she is facing at Century Life will continue with her. Is the problem Century Life, or is she the problem (perspective, attitude, ability)? Somehow, Susan needs to come up with a realistic opinion of her abilities. If she is running toward something (better opportunity, job position she desires, corporate culture), then she should more seriously consider the new opportunity.

She shouldn’t stay for the promotion; just having a job title change isn’t likely to fix her concerns with Century Life. She may be satisfied for the short term, but ultimately she will be faced with the same decision at some point in the future.

Based on the choices in front of her, the new job seems to make the most sense for a long-term career. Susan just needs to make sure that the new company will actually fix her issues with Century Life.

Actuary 4

What do I really want?

The grass is greener only when I choose to take care of it. A new house with green grass will end up with dead grass if I choose to ignore it. Susan should spend time in reflection and identifying what she really wants:

- Do I really want a higher role or do I just want recognition of my hard work?
- Is what I’m doing right now really what I’m passionate about?

- Is it the money, the title, the prestige?

Send my gremlins to court.

Speculating on a bad reputation is worse than finding out the truth. I would find a way to get feedback on my performance and perception directly from the sources. If there's a skill I need to learn to be considered for promotion, then I need to find out. If it's just about exams, then I need to figure out if I really want to work for a company that cares more about paper than production. In short, I'd go find proof that my perception is reality.

Do more research about the culture of the other company.

Once I know what I really want, I'd ask the other company questions to figure out if its culture aligns with what I want and what I value. No sense in going to a new house that doesn't fit my style.

I don't want a pity party.

Talking to Thomas about a promotion conditional on staying is not to my benefit, especially when "talking about a promotion" is not the same as getting one. I would ask Alex and Thomas to give me the information that shows that they are in full agreement with the promotion on its own merits rather than to get me to stay.

In short, I'd ask the other company to give me some time to level-set, get going with my fact checking, and then make a decision once I truly know what my current company thinks of me and my future with them.

Actuary 5

There is no right answer. Susan has two options: stay or go. We assume that the offer she received is the best she could find. She has limited her corporate future by not finishing the exams. She always has the alternative to strike out on her own, but it feels like she likes the structured environment of conventional employment.

Susan has to decide for herself whether she will be happier staying than leaving. In any event, by offering to leave she has brought her concerns forcefully to the attention of management. She need no longer fear that she is just taken for granted as an "invisible" worker. It's clear that her immediate

boss values her contribution but is not desperate to keep her.

She will now find out what Thomas thinks of her prospects. If she values herself more than he does, then her choice is to make the jump and hope for the best, or to strike out on her own and find out if the consulting market values her potential as much as she does. She's called Thomas' bluff, but if he doesn't take the bluff then she will have changed nothing by the feint—though the precariousness of her current position will then be clarified.

If she does go into independent consulting, then she should check with her boss, who seems to like her work, to see if he will retain her as an independent

contractor. If he decides that he would rather hire a replacement, then she will have a clear picture of where she stands.

When you put yourself in play by announcing an intent to leave the company, you are subject to finding out exactly how you are valued. That can be positive or negative, but it certainly involves risk. If Susan has been happy and doesn't like risk, then she should have simply stayed the course.

Now she's in play, and we can only hope that it works out well for her. In any event, she has forced a time of transition and her life will not be the same afterwards as it was before.

Others zeroed in on Susan's choice to remain a career ASA:

Actuary 6

Susan needs to know how Thomas truly views her. It's possible that he has interpreted her decision to stay an ASA as a lack of desire to progress.

Actuary 7

If I were Susan, I would look around and say "Hey, FSAs get promotions. Maybe I should knuckle down and pass the rest of the exams."

She wants more responsibility, right? Does she think responsibility doesn't come with strings attached? If she can accept that her life will become more stressful and complicated with a promotion, then she might as well get her FSA and endure the stress of a few more exams, reap the benefit of the knowledge gained and exam raises, AND get promoted!

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Actuary 8

Either take the new job, or do what it takes to get promoted within the current company—the FSA track. Obviously the current company values FSAs more than ASAs. Longevity only results in pay increases, not necessarily promotions to a higher level.

Actuary 9

Susan should consider finishing her FSA given the focus at Century Life on the FSA credential. It will only increase her marketability in general, and eliminate that roadblock at Century Life or anywhere else.

One respondent felt Susan made a clear tactical error:

First, I would advise that one accept the offer before resigning your current job, as the offer could be pulled prior to acceptance. Second, if she did accept the offer, then renegeing would be a bad thing.

Here’s a perspective on why Susan should (conditionally) stay:

I find it interesting that Susan looked for another job before having a discussion with her

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current boss. The awkward situation she finds herself in now is because she wasn’t assertive enough to request the promotion.

When someone likes their job and their boss they are very fortunate. When you find yourself in a good job do as much as you can to stay there. There are many, many people who have a hard time getting out of bed because they do not like their job or the people they work with. Susan is leaving a place she likes with the exception of wanting a promotion, and going to a place with the promotion but has no idea if she will like the people she works with or her boss.

She may burn a bridge with the employer who offered her the new job, but if she can get the promotion and a good explanation as to why she hasn’t

been offered it before, I would recommend she stay. We all like promotions and to make more money, but there are more important things than money such as peace of mind, being challenged and being appreciated.

And, finally, one answer that helps explain why this case generated so many responses:

I imagine this situation hits close to home for many managers. I know I learned the hard way that part of keeping your team engaged is to ensure that you continuously discuss the alignment between their career aspirations and the opportunities within the organization.

The answer here isn’t to negotiate a promotion to keep someone or to get more money. It may be too late, but the answer is to start the discussion about career direction. If there

is still a match then maybe Susan should stay, but not for a few more dollars and continued ambiguity about where her path is heading.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Susan came back to Alex to say that she really would like to stay, if they could work something out. It became clear that one thing that was very important to Susan was to gain management expertise. Alex got Thomas to sign off on promoting Susan to manager, and Alex assigned one of his staff to her. Susan and Alex were both happy with how things turned out, and Susan began to build her management credentials. ■



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