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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “Stay or Go?”

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In the August issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the career decision below. Here are selected responses and excerpts, edited for space and clarity, followed by the real-life conclusion. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

STAY OR GO?

Hardy had recently taken over as the product line actuary, a new role in the wake of the merger of his company into its parent. He was located at his company’s remote location, where he had been responsible for the actuarial work for several lines, including that one, for some time, but now it was receiving new scrutiny as the line reported up through a different operation within the parent.

It was quarter-end, and Hardy had arranged (and been approved) to take a few days’ vacation to attend his 20th college reunion on the West Coast, back to back with a three-day trip to the parent for its annual leadership conference. On the final day of the conference, his new boss came to him with questions about the third quarter financial results of his line, which were worse than expected. Hardy called back to the company and did his best to answer them, but would need to do substantial analysis, far beyond what he could accomplish prior to his trip, to fully satisfy his boss.

Hardy had been looking forward to this trip for some time, and had actually done a lot of organizational work for the reunion, so that people were counting on him to be there. His wife was also looking forward to the trip, and was flying out to meet him there. He would only miss two more days of work.

On the other hand, this role was a new one, both for him and for the parent, and he was one of few people being retained in the wake of the merger. The parent company gave quarterly financial result variations much greater scrutiny than his company had, and he was worried that he might not be seen as a team player if he waited until his return to dig into the issue.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Many thanks to all of the respondents to this issue’s case study! The vast majority felt Hardy shouldn’t hesitate to go, with one caveat encapsulated in this response:



The answer to this question requires instinct and it is hard to offer sound advice without a gut feeling about the relationships involved. If Hardy has the trust and confidence of his boss then he should say “this trip is important to me so I would like your support in going and when I return I will give you the detailed analysis to back up my explanations.” If Hardy doesn’t have the trust and confidence of his boss AND he wants to stay in this role long term, then he should consider making the compromises necessary to meet the needs of his boss first.

A second caveat, emphasizing communication to solve the dilemma:

Hardy needs to start by communicating with his new boss and getting some feedback. I’m not saying he has to land on what his new boss suggests, but I always think that open communication is the best starting point. It may be that his boss has no qualms about two more days of waiting. It may be that his boss is worried about his own job and would willingly throw Hardy under the bus. It’s hard to gauge which without more feedback.

A respondent raised good questions about the quality of the communication:

First, what was the nature of Hardy’s communication with his boss when he was asked the questions? Did he communicate the amount of work that was needed and negotiate a deadline to set expectations? Did he assume that the boss knew he had scheduled vacation or did he remind him during their encounter?

How tenuous is Hardy’s employment? Unfortunately, most of us are not good at assessing our own situation.

Two pointed to this as a bellwether moment in determining company attitudes:

This is a great time to find out how the company respects vacation and personal time. If there are negative consequences to Hardy

attending the reunion, it would be indicative that the new company does not respect its employees. That lack of respect will be exhibited in many ways beyond imposing on a planned vacation.

If his parent company, and the higher-ups within, are so driven that they cannot wait two additional days for explanations that 1) cover results in the past, and that, therefore, are not going to change no matter when the analysis is complete, and 2) are not likely to be material enough to force changes to future projections, then it sounds like a place where Hardy should not wish to work in the future. If they fire him for that, he will ultimately be better off.

Many felt that the small number of additional days out of the office tipped the decision in favor of going, captured in these responses:

Judging whether to accommodate urgent requests is always a difficult one. However, there will always be urgent requests at any company, and very few of them will not wait for a few days to complete.

In the grand scheme of things, this is not such a rush issue that it cannot wait for two days. Even if Hardy finds a change that would fix the performance of the line, a two-day delay is minor—even if the change could be implemented immediately.

Hardy could let his new manager know that he did what he could in a short time frame to address his manager's priority questions related to the financials as he reached out to the office while he was at the conference. However, Hardy also should remind his new manager that due to personal plans, he is going to be out of the office for just a couple of days and that he will have to finish his analysis when he returns.

And finally, a response that touches on a variety of interesting points:

I would go to my reunion. I would remind my boss that I am traveling and will return to the office on the previously agreed-upon date. I would also advise of my intention to get the analysis started ASAP. A manager gets his work done through others: I would get the ball rolling on the research by instructing my direct reports to start gathering information that pertains to the questions my boss asked me. I would allot a couple of hours each morning to managing the process remotely and answering questions from those I task with doing the preliminary work. If I had an admin, I would keep that person in the loop, and instruct him/her to partner with my second in command, who would leverage down wherever necessary and proper in order to free up time for the team to manage this new priority.

Work-life balance remains an important consideration for all working folk and their employers. Hardy's 20th college reunion will only happen once, and it is clearly important to him, as he assumed quite a bit of responsibility for planning certain aspects

of the event. On the other hand, I also assume that providing detailed analysis regarding happenings in his department will be relatively commonplace.

Hardy sold 40+ hours of his time to the company per his employment contract. His employer granted him paid time off to be used at his discretion pending the company's approval, which he already has. Neither he nor the company anticipated that the results would be worse than expected. They both, however, anticipated his time out of the office. Further, he will need to do "substantial analysis, far beyond what he could accomplish prior to his trip, to fully satisfy his boss." Thus, assuming an eight-hour day, he might achieve a 16+ hour jump-start on his analysis by not going to his 20-year reunion, but it likely won't be enough time to complete the analysis. He may also plant a seed of regret that has the potential to turn into a tree of resentment as time wears on.

It is easy to accept the need to reschedule or cancel a dinner or even a business meeting. It is substantially more difficult and emotionally costly to forgo a personal milestone celebration, i.e., a child's or spouse's birthday, a parent's medical procedure, a 20-year college reunion. Such things impact the quality of an employee's life and may have an impact on that employee's work satisfaction and, ultimately, the company's ability to retain his talent.

Hardy survived the merger, presumably because the parent company saw value in his skill set. I would hope that Hardy makes the decision to keep his commitments outside work as a consideration of self-care. I would hope that his employer makes the decision to keep its commitment to him and not rescind its approval of his time off or find him guilty of not being a team player.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Hardy knew that his boss (and above) had a "drop everything" attitude toward unexpected financial deviations. In his new role he had no staff to assist him, and felt it would be very difficult to do any in-depth analysis and still participate in the reunion to a meaningful extent. He reluctantly decided to cancel the trip.

Not long after, Hardy's job was eliminated. He realized that had he gone to the reunion, he would have always wondered if that had been the nail in the coffin. Instead, he concluded the job just wasn't a fit to his style, and felt a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

He never skipped another reunion. ■



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