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Is Your Job in Trouble? Look for These Red Flags

Signs of career trouble don't usually appear overnight. Nor are they always obvious. More often, there are small clues that pop up over time that suggest your job trajectory is headed in the wrong direction.

Indicators of career distress can be internal or external in origin. For example, job difficulties may stem from your own feelings of professional malaise, often prompted by boredom or a lack of challenge. Red flags can also come in the form of changes in the work environment that suggest you're losing your professional clout.

Whatever shape these signs take, it's important to recognize them when they appear. Staying too long in a problematic employment situation can hinder your advancement and earning potential and cause undue stress. Here are some common signs of career trouble and suggestions for addressing them:

- **Your values conflict with your employer or colleagues.** Signs of a culture clash are sometimes obvious from the first days on the job. In other cases, employees realize their values or those of their employer or colleagues have diverged over time. Either way, you're likely to feel uncomfortable at work. And when you feel out of sync with others in the office, this can lead to job dissatisfaction. Your employment also may be in jeopardy if colleagues don't feel that you "fit in."

Depending on how severe the culture clash is, you may have no choice but to consider finding a new job. On the other hand, if the problems stem mostly from differences in work style, you'll have to decide if you're willing to adapt – or at least learn to tolerate – the prevailing norm. As you consider your options, keep in mind that most people are happiest at work when they have respect for the values of their employer and coworkers.

- **Your job has stalled.** Your responsibilities haven't changed in years, and your compensation has barely risen. Even worse, your job has become routine and devoid of challenges.

If you find yourself in this situation, a "career audit" may help you determine what's lacking in your professional life and what you can do about it. Begin by taking stock of your skills and personality. For example, maybe you're highly analytical but don't have many opportunities to use this aptitude. Or, if you enjoy meeting new people, you may feel stymied by a role that involves interacting with a limited number of coworkers.

It also may help to reflect on previous work and educational experiences to recall the subjects, environments and projects that have traditionally appealed to you. Evaluate

these with your current situation in mind. Are certain interests or aspects of work that you've always enjoyed missing?

In light of your conclusions, consider what your ideal job would look like if you incorporated all your "likes" into a single position. Talk to your boss about recasting your responsibilities to better fit your interests, skills and strengths. You might also seek out additional training or educational opportunities that will allow you to grow in new directions. If you meet with resistance from higher-ups who may not envision your position or compensation changing significantly, you are probably wise to consider seeking a new job.

- **Your role is being minimized.** Have your responsibilities been reduced? Maybe you've suddenly realized you're no longer included in planning meetings or copied on important memos? If so, these are red flags that your job could be at risk. Although you may not understand the reasons why, your boss may be sending you a message that your input is not as valuable as it once was.

Rather than pretending not to notice the slights, arrange a meeting with your manager to find out if there are problems with your performance. Perhaps your boss is unhappy with how you're managing your responsibilities, or there may be a misunderstanding between you and your supervisor of which you're unaware. By openly addressing the matter, you may be able to clear the air and address any weaknesses. On the other hand, you may come away with the realization that your job situation is beyond repair.

- **You're unhappy with your job – and it may not be a secret.** Even if you're disappointed with the state of your career, keep your displeasure to yourself. Word will undoubtedly spread if you're badmouthing your boss or your job, and this could lead to your being asked to leave before you're ready.

If you realize you're at an impasse with your employer when it comes to career advancement, begin a discreet job search. In the meantime, resolve to carry out your role in a professional and cheerful manner, with the goal of eventually leaving on a positive note.

- **You're not getting the recognition and rewards you deserve.** Sometimes the contributions of the best workers are overlooked, especially if they're not comfortable touting their accomplishments. These employees also may get passed over for important projects. Older employees often fall into this category. Their bosses may think they're content to coast along with the same responsibilities until retirement, and experienced workers may think it's unnecessary to toot their own horn.

If you're not being properly recognized or rewarded for your accomplishments, you may need to make a point of letting your boss know when you've met an important milestone or resolved a business problem. Don't assume your supervisor is always aware of how well you're performing your job. Also, if you're not getting the challenging projects you deserve, take the initiative to ask for them. Despite a strong record of achievement and a

stated willingness to contribute more, if you find that you're consistently passed over for recognition and high-profile assignments, this could be a sign that you've peaked in your current position.

Although you don't want to act rashly when red flags begin to appear in your professional life, you don't want to ignore them either. But before starting a job search, realistically appraise your overall employment situation. Develop a list of pros and cons as they relate to your current position and see which column wins out. Also, take stock of your marketability and employment prospects by searching job listings, networking and talking to recruiters. You may discover that a better opportunity is yours for the asking.

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