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### CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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#### Mind Matters: Leaving a Lab Gracefully

Irene S. Levine  
United States  
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Because we spend so many hours there, our labs often feel like second homes. Warts and all, our scientific colleagues become a family of sorts. It's hard to leave a home, and a family, behind.

Yet, people often choose to leave their labs every day, for a variety of reasons. They may be interested in working with another group or in a different research domain. They may be seeking better pay and benefits. They may be following a partner to another city, or their colleagues' warts may have proved intolerable. Sometimes, when their funding has lapsed, for example, they may have no choice about leaving. Regardless of the circumstances, most trainees can benefit from transitions if they're handled well.

#### TEMPER YOUR FEELINGS

The most important thing you will take with you to your next position is your reputation, so preserve that until the bitter end. This is much harder to do if your departure is forced. "Feelings of frustration, anger, or sadness are natural," Edward Muzio, a human resources consultant and one of the authors of *Four Secrets to Liking Your Work*, writes in an e-mail to *Science Careers*. "Make sure they don't

"Go through the work in progress and come to an agreement about which parts of it are nearly complete and which parts may be completed by others."  
--Frederick Maxfield.

impact the quality of your work or your workplace interactions."

If you're leaving due to cutbacks in funds or lost positions, your departure may be disappointing to your supervisor as well--and that realization can be reassuring. "Many have been through it before, and all but the most obtuse understand that it's more often about the organization than the person," Muzio says.

Whether or not you're the one who made the decision, the rest of your stay in your lab is a valuable steppingstone, an opportunity to prove that you're a principled professional. So take care to meticulously meet your remaining obligations, or as many of them as your colleagues and bosses could reasonably expect. Learn whatever you can from the situation, and move on with dignity.

#### AVOID BLAME

Above all, don't blame others. "There may or may not be an evildoer at the center of the problem. And if you point one out in a moment of anger, you hurt only your own credibility," Muzio says. He recommends that trainees stay focused on their real endgame--their long-term career goals--and not get caught up in what he calls the "lost battle of departure."

"Leaving with insults, recriminations, or even sabotage helps no one in the long run," Janie Harden Fritz, an associate professor of communication and rhetorical studies at [Duquesne University](#) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, writes in an e-mail to *Science Careers*. "Reputations can be very fragile and are protected best by civil behavior under every circumstance, with studied consistency."

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## DON'T BURN BRIDGES

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Burning bridges is generally a bad idea, because you may need to use them again someday. "I have had a few people who left and then sought to return a few years later or were hired into positions that interacted with me," writes Professor Frederick Maxfield, chair of the department of biochemistry at [Weill Cornell Medical College](#) in New York City, in an e-mail.

Acting angrily, irresponsibly, or uncivilly is a sure way to burn bridges, but many other ways exist. In one of her first research positions after college, Wendy Beckman joined a lab where she felt squeamish working with animals. Furthermore, she didn't respect her supervisor. "When our lab was hit by budget cuts, I was the one who took the hit for the team. I was not the latest one hired, but the doctor explained that those who came after me could more easily learn my job than I could learn anyone else's. This wasn't true, but it saved face for both of us," says Beckman, now a public information officer at the [University of Cincinnati](#) in Ohio.

When looking for a new job, Beckman says, "I broke the cardinal rule of interviews: Don't badmouth your former employer." When asked why she was leaving her lab, she was "tactless," she admits. "It bit me--the interviewing doc was a protégé of my current boss and was highly offended at my criticism of him. Not only did I not get the job, but things got even frostier for me at the lab I was leaving. My co-workers started acting as if I was a pariah or leper, and I brought it all on myself," she says.

## MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION

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This is a time when you need to keep an open dialogue, especially if you're not leaving on your own terms. Although the tendency might be to clam up, any constructive exchange may facilitate collaboration or improve performance in the future.

If the decision to leave is yours, be courteous and diplomatic in discussing your reasons. It's perfectly acceptable to tell a little white lie to stay on good terms. Frame your announcement in terms of "opportunity knocked" rather than "I always disliked your controlling management style." And get it done: Telling your supervisor you're leaving is hard, but the longer you wait, the harder it becomes.

## TURN IT INTO A WIN-WIN

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Whatever the circumstances, it's important to clarify expectations about when you're leaving and what projects you need to finish before you go. "In my experience, problems arise because different assumptions are made by the mentor and the trainee that were never explicitly discussed," Jonathan L. Haines, a professor of molecular physiology and biophysics and director of the [Center for Human Genetics Research](#) at [Vanderbilt University Medical Center](#) in Nashville, Tennessee, writes in an e-mail.

"One of the most important things to do is go through the work in progress and come to an agreement about which parts of it are nearly complete and which parts may be completed by others. If unfinished projects are left behind, make sure that the data are organized and annotated in such a way that another person in the lab can use the data in preparing a publication," Maxfield suggests.

Importantly, "any help that a departed lab member can provide in writing papers will increase the chance that the work will eventually be published and that the departed trainee will be given a high degree of credit (e.g., first authorship)," Maxfield continues. He tells the story of a postdoc who had to leave abruptly for health reasons. With his supervisor's permission, the postdoc made copies of his data and began working on manuscripts as he recuperated. "This resulted in a few first-author publications that helped him launch his career and also helped me write a competitive grant renewal."

## ASK FOR HELP

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If your departure is involuntary, your employer may be willing to help you land on your feet. "A young scientist should seek assistance in finding another position," says Maxfield. If the hoped-for help from your direct supervisor doesn't materialize, Maxfield proposes speaking to other senior faculty members familiar with the situation or utilizing other institutional resources such as a graduate school official or the head of a postdoctoral-affairs office. "In some cases where there has been a 'falling out' between a mentor and trainee, in my role as department chair I have been able to help the trainee get another job," he says.

## LEAVE THEM WITH A GOOD TASTE

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With all the Sturm und Drang associated with leaving a supervisor, you may forget to consider your colleagues in the lab. So make sure you leave on good terms with everyone to pave the way for future collaborations and to further enhance your reputation for professionalism and collegiality. As a small token, it's nice to bring food or cookies on your last day and to write a note of appreciation to your mentors or anyone else who has been helpful to you.

Beginnings and endings are part of the ebb and flow of life. By being thoughtful and clarifying roles and expectations before you sign on, you can turn what could be a disruptive event into a positive experience and keep your career moving on a straight trajectory.

### Next Mind Matters column: When persistence turns to perfection

You've been working on the same paper for almost a year and can't get it good enough to submit for publication. Or perhaps you have been invited to give a talk to your department and spent many days and nights working on a PowerPoint presentation, but you still can't get it "right." When does striving to be perfect get out of hand and become a risk of actually undermining your productivity and career aspirations? For an upcoming column in Mind Matters, please send your thoughts and anecdotes to [IreneLevine@gmail.com](mailto:IreneLevine@gmail.com).

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