

Should you tell it like it is on the way out the door?

TIMES THREE

DERRYN HINCH • KELLIE RIGG • MICHAEL DICKMANN

Infamous last words

If you're lucky, that nice warm feeling may last right up to when you start looking for a new job, Cameron Cooper writes.

IN DAYS PAST, the etiquette for employees leaving a job was to bow out gracefully and suck up any ill-feeling for the boss or the company.

Today, a more forthright social media generation doesn't always follow the script. When former Goldman Sachs chief Greg Smith quit early last year, he vented his spleen with a piece in *The New York Times*, accusing the investment bank of accepting a "toxic and destructive" culture that sidelined the interests of clients. He then released a book to drive home the point.

Groupon founder and chief executive Andrew Mason opted for transparency – and a dash of humour – rather than toeing the corporate communications line when he bowed out from the group buying site late last year. In a letter to employees, he wrote: "After four-and-a-half intense and wonderful years as CEO of Groupon, I've decided I'd like to spend more time with my family. Just kidding – I was fired today." He also accepted responsibility for the company's plummeting share price.

What is the best way to exit? Discreetly, with head held high? Or with a broadside at the boss? INTHEBLACK canvasses the views of three people with plenty of experience in the area.

PHOTO NEWSPIX



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DERRYN HINCH

MEDIA PERSONALITY

www.humanheadline.com.au

Derryn Hinch reckons he is well placed to comment on job exits. "I've been sacked 15 times, so I guess I am used to it," says the Australian television and radio star.

Famous for his candour and known as the Human Headline, Hinch unsurprisingly believes honesty is always the best approach.

"It's a topic I'm very strong about," he says. "What burns me about sackings is that people insult the public's intelligence. They say 'so-and-so resigned' when it's clear that so-and-so didn't want to go: they were sacked."

A pet hate of Hinch's is the euphemisms management roll out to explain a high-profile firing – "They have left to pursue other interests" or "They are focusing on special projects". After being axed from his eponymous program by Channel 7 in 1991, he recalls a director suggested that the public be told that "you resigned to go and write books".

"To me, that insults my audience," Hinch says. "It's like saying, 'I don't give a stuff about you – I'm going off to write books'. The truth is that I was sacked."

With a career spanning print, radio and television since the 1960s, Hinch is amused that his outspokenness has often contributed to his demise in a job. "The weird thing is this: they hire me because of who I am and what I say – and they fire me for who I am and what I say."

Controversially sacked from Melbourne radio station 3AW late last year, despite topping the ratings with his drive program, Hinch acknowledges that senior management became tired of his public campaigns. "Well, if my obsession with child abuse, which I believe helped with the establishment of a royal commission – if that's an obsession, then I am proud of being sacked over an obsession."

At the same time, Hinch acknowledges the right of corporations to hire and fire their talent. "I've always said, with every sacking I've announced on air, that companies are businesses. They have the right to fire you. [But] it may not be the smartest thing they have ever done."

He may be self-deprecating over his high number of career axings, but Hinch says he is not flippant about the impact of being fired – on himself or others.

"It's not nice being sacked and I feel for a lot of people when they are sacked or made redundant. It's an awful feeling when you look in the shaving mirror every morning and you may be only 55 and think, 'I may never work again'. It's a terrible, terrible thing."

Now back on the Seven Network and buoyed by a life-saving liver transplant in 2011, does Hinch have any regrets about any of his well-publicised exits? "No, not at all," he says.

For the record, though, he does want it to be known that he has not always been pushed out the door. He has resigned ... once.

■ Derryn Hinch is national public affairs commentator for the Seven Network in Australia. Best known for his work on Melbourne radio and national current affairs television shows, he has been a journalist for more than 50 years. Often controversial, Hinch has spent time in jail and served home detention for breaching suppression orders. >

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HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR
Randstad, www.randstad.com.au

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Nailing the delivery and content of job exit messages can help the departing employee and the organisation, insists Kellie Rigg.

First, the worker can protect their future. Second, the feedback they provide can enlighten management and contribute to culture changes.

“The way you do it is [the key] to the discussion,” Rigg says. “You can give value to the organisation by giving feedback and helping (managers) understand the reasons you’re leaving. But there’s also your personal brand to consider in terms of the perceptions that you create as you’re leaving the organisation. You’ll most likely be looking for new work and you don’t want to burn your relationship.”

While she believes there is a place for honesty when employees walk out the door for the last time, Rigg warns against a venomous rant. “It might feel good at the time, but the long-term impacts for your own personal brand can be detrimental.”

She advises being constructive; identifying the positives and the negatives of the employment experience; delivering fair feedback; and remaining professional throughout.

While the focus is often on employees who are leaving, Rigg believes sackings also put corporate processes under the microscope. If a prominent executive is fired, she says a considered communications plan should be implemented to inform staff and any other stakeholders. Suggesting that the end of the tenure has been a mutual decision when staff really know the boss was pushed is only likely to cause internal disquiet and distrust.

“A communications plan for not only the CEO, but also the people in the rest of the organisation is really important,” Rigg says. “Honesty is the best policy, but you’ve got to be careful in your communications in terms of how that’s delivered to the organisation.”

Simply reporting that a senior executive has been let go does not cut it. “There’s got to be more context with the decision – to have an understanding of what’s actually going on and how you communicate that.”

Smart companies value frankness from departing employees and use exit interviews wisely to examine trends around turnover and learn how to improve the culture for remaining staff, Rigg says. “[Then] there are some companies where the idea of an exit interview is just a tick-box process.”

The failure to properly examine exit data is a common management mistake. “We know turnover is a massive expense for businesses, small or large. So good organisations will want to understand the reasons why people are leaving and provide a structured process for feedback – mostly in a confidential or semi-confidential manner.”

Rigg also sees the greater danger posed by social media. “People can jump online and it spreads so quickly in comparison to the past. You don’t have the level of control of communication that you used to.”



Handled properly, an employee departure can benefit both an organisation and the staff member and lead to the “boomerang” scenario of a former employee working elsewhere, gaining experience and then coming back to the group and adding further value.

“It goes back to your employer brand and how you want to be represented as an organisation,” Rigg says. “You don’t want individuals who leave to say ‘gosh, it’s a terrible place to work’. You want them to say ‘that was a great experience’.”

■ Kellie Rigg is the HR consulting operations director for Randstad, a Fortune Global 500 company and one of the world’s biggest HR services providers. A registered organisational psychologist, Rigg advises multinational companies and small and medium businesses.

MICHAEL DICKMANN
HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSOR
Cranfield University, www.cranfield.ac.uk

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Going out with a bang can easily backfire, according to Michael Dickmann. “I like to be authentic, but I would also try to advise people to think about their long-term future,” he says. With anecdotal evidence suggesting many employees are unhappy with their boss, Dickmann concedes that the prospect of a “moment of glory” with a candid exit is enticing for many. “The temptation can be quite high.”

However, employees must weigh up risks versus returns and appreciate that a vitriolic parting shot may affect their job prospects for years to come. In an era when social media platforms and the internet make it easy to trace people’s history, Dickmann says employers often pore over the web to check the profile of potential recruits. A spur-of-the-moment comment “stays with you for a long time”.

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or internal messaging systems compound the risk.

“If you are going out with a bang, not just in terms of saying it but also writing it and putting it on some sort of social media platform, that increases the danger,” Dickmann says.

Disgruntled employees must also face a couple of other realities: colleagues may see any grievance with the company in a different light and frown upon verbal or written criticisms; and the boss’s strong networks may mean that any comments will be heard or seen by other industry figures and employers.

However, there are instances when being outspoken may be advantageous. For example, Dickmann says a whistleblower who exposes genuine corporate misdemeanours may gain from their frankness. “People might admire you for it and it could lead to getting the next job.”

The charming and highly acclaimed exit message of Groupon chief executive officer Andrew Mason from the company in March this year – “I’ve decided that I’d like to spend more time with my family. Just kidding – I was fired today” – shows that there is a place for humour and truthfulness when farewelling a company. It also highlighted one of the lame clichés often used to cover up a sacking.

Nevertheless, it’s unrealistic to expect companies to be completely open in announcing the departure of a senior employee – in particular, according to Dickmann, because a split should be between management and an individual, with the person’s privacy being respected.

“A company is incredibly unlikely to come out with the true reasons and make them public,” he says. “That’s not helping the employee.”

Essentially the company’s focus should be on potentially finding the fired person a new job and dealing with the emotions of remaining employees, who may have “survivor syndrome” and be questioning why they kept their jobs or be worried about their own careers.

Dickmann concludes it is, in general, safer and smarter for employees to couch a departure in diplomatic language. “[Otherwise] it opens up too many risks.”

■ Michael Dickmann is a Professor of International Human Resource Management at Cranfield University in Britain. A consultant to brands such as PwC, Pepsi, HSBC and BMW, he is the lead author of *Global Careers*, part of a Routledge series on human resource management.



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A vicious departing shot at a company after quitting can hurt an employee’s personal brand and future job prospects.
- The immediacy of social media has increased the danger of potentially damaging exit rants.
- Management clichés suggesting an employee is leaving to ‘pursue other interests’ are widely disparaged.
- Smart companies use employee exits to learn from their mistakes and improve organisational culture.

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