

The Ethics of Entering and Leaving Organizations

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How much time do we commit to thinking about our approach to constructing and maintaining positive ethical climates within our institutions? If it is our goal to be seen as honest, ethical, caring, and civil individuals, we must project those qualities from our earliest interactions with an organization. We send messages about the quality of our character from the time we first interact with a prospective employer. Those early interactions set the tone for ways in which others will see us and the expectations student and professional colleagues will have for how we will comport ourselves. It is extremely important to pay attention to how we enter the organization environment.

At the same time, a common dynamic in higher education involves professionals moving from one institution to another. Movement among institutions requires that we also think about the way in which we depart a professional experience. Our approach to bringing closure to a professional experience sends a powerful message about the condition in which we are willing to leave our relationships when our time at an organization is over. Too few of us pay close attention to the quality of character we project as we enter and leave organizations.

From the time one writes a letter of application or responds to a recruitment call from an institution, we are constructing relationships. The thought that we are creating a moral climate for our relationships and providing others with windows into our character should guide all subsequent behaviors. Every mismanaged conversation or unpleasant interaction represents a hurdle to be cleared if we find ourselves working at that institution. At the earliest communication it is important to interact with members of the institution as if they were already our colleagues. In that regard, approach the relationships with care and attention to how you treat every other person with whom you interact. As soon as possible, it is important to get a sense of the character of the organization, while also introducing the organization to your ways of being. Too many candidates mismanage their relationship with a prospective institution by being rude towards office support staff or being too “high maintenance” while making arrangements for the campus interview. These interactions and the resulting perceptions often get communicated to others. Even if the person prevails as the successful candidate, the behaviors shown in those early interactions remain in the institutional memory of the organization.

Interviews provide the first opportunity for solid relationship grounding with a number of different people. It is important to manage those interactions by constructing a network of relationships that you may likely bear responsibility for sustaining. Know that you will be held accountable for any values commitments you make during the interview process. Pay a great deal of attention to your words that set the context for how you enter the organization. When negotiating salary and other conditions, do so with the recognition that you will need to be in a significant relationship with the person with whom you are negotiating. Be conscious of leaving that conversation at a level that will not require repair in order for the relationship to be successful.

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When entering a new organization, be cognizant of the impact your words and actions will have. Focus more on becoming attuned to the dominant conversation occurring within the organization than with making your voice heard. The ability and willingness to listen communicate a powerful ethic. It is more important to enter the existing relationship network than it is to construct a relationship network around yourself. It requires confidence and character to honor the community you enter. Listening to others is a successful way to form positive relationships with others. Be careful how much you talk, how boldly you proclaim, and how publicly you make judgments about others. It is very difficult to lead an organization from outside the existing relationship structures.

While there tends to be a good deal of thoughtfulness given to how we enter organizations, we often depart with much greater impulsiveness. Excellent leaders can undo their positive reputations and legacies by leaving organizations thoughtlessly. The typical way we do ourselves harm is by “firing a few last shots.” Too often the shots that are fired hit the wrong people. It is as essential to manage our relationships positively as we leave an organization, as it is to manage well as we enter. We should leave every relationship at a level that we could return to the organization with no regrets and no shame about how we have been or what we have said. As we depart an organization, we should do so being gracious, graceful, and grateful.

What does the way you enter an organization say about your character? How does one ethically manage difficult issues that arise during the interview process? How can you advocate for yourself when negotiating salary, while also nurturing a positive ongoing relationship with your prospective supervisor? How can you gracefully enter an organization, respecting the existing relationship network, while also creating space for your own leadership voice? How do you graciously leave a disappointing work experience, so that you retain your integrity and show gratefulness?
