



Business Basics

## Should I Stay Or Should I Go?

Tara Weiss, 07.15.08, 7:50 PM ET

During her time as a marketing executive at Citibank in the '80s and '90s, Nancy Shenker watched the company's stock price drop from \$70 a share to about \$7. Shenker decided to stay, even as groups of colleagues were laid off and perks like taking a Town Car home after working late were rescinded.

Shenker's calculated decision to remain in her job was based on two things--her high-performing colleagues stuck around, and she figured being a problem solver during tough times would go a long way when the downturn ended.

Her gamble paid off. Shenker eventually left on her own terms after 13 years with Citibank, an executive title and a solid résumé.

Deciding whether to stay or go during a downturn at your company is a balancing act. There are costs to leaving your job and starting fresh as the newbie at a new firm. Then again, do you want to be one of the many looking for work in your industry after a massive round of layoffs?

Like Shenker did, look around to see if your most talented colleagues are heading for the exit sign. That's a pretty good indication that those among the most vested in the organization are worried and don't think it's worth staying.

"When the people who are the future of the organization are leaving, that's a sign that company isn't doing well," says Will Werhane, global managing director at the human resources consulting firm Hay Group. "It doesn't mean [you should] run out the door--it means [you should] examine other elements."

First, don't pay attention to rumors. Thoroughly research the state of your company as if you were investing money into it. Pay particular attention to how your organization stacks up against the rest of the industry. One fiscal quarter of bad earnings does not spell catastrophe.

"There's a difference between a bad quarter and a troubling trend," says John Pearson, president of the management consulting firm John Pearson Associates and author of *Mastering the Management Buckets: 20 Critical Competencies for Leading Your Business or Nonprofit*. "When you hear disappointing news about your company, get the official and credible explanation of what's happening." Gossip in the cafeteria doesn't count.

If you don't work for a public company, find out how others in the industry are doing by talking to people you know at competing companies. Ask those contacts how sales are and whether they're laying anyone off. If that route proves a bust, ask head hunters; they're a wealth of information about the companies they cover.

If the company reported several quarters of poor earnings, learn what leadership's plan is to repair the situation. "If you don't have confidence in leadership doing well, you shouldn't follow it," says Werhane.

Shenker eventually left Citibank because she was offered a job with a higher salary and more responsibility in the publishing industry, which is where she began her career. Throughout the down times though, she always had a backup plan--her résumé was up-to-date and she never stopped networking, so she'd be in a better position in case she was one of the many laid off.

During the lean times at Citibank, Shenker made herself indispensable by concentrating on bringing in new clients and earning the company money. Unless your employer is being wiped away completely, it still needs people to do the job. Why not be the one who works to solve problems?

"Downturns can be the most compelling periods for career development," says Tashi Lossalle, vice president of strategic development at the executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles.

"Leadership recognizes it needs new solutions and it's prepared to be far more open-minded about where they come from. If you can come up with those solutions, you're very valuable."