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Counteroffer Acceptance - Road to Career Ruin

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Matthew Henry, the 17th-century writer said, "Many a dangerous temptation comes to us in fine gay colours that are but skin deep." The same can be said for counteroffers, those magnetic enticements designed to lure you back into the nest after you've decided it's time to fly away.

The litany of horror stories I've come across in my years as an executive recruiter, consultant and publisher, provides a litmus test that clearly indicates counteroffers should never be accepted ... EVER! I define a counteroffer simply as an inducement from your current employer to get you to stay after you've announced your intention to take another job. We're not talking about those instances when you receive an offer but don't tell your boss. Nor are we discussing offers that you never intended to take, yet tell your employer about anyway as a "they-want-me-but-I'm-staying-with-you" ploy. These are merely astute positioning tactics you may choose to use to reinforce your worth by letting your boss know you have other options. Mention of a true offer, however, carries an actual threat to quit.

Interviews with employers who make counteroffers, and employees who accept them, have shown that as tempting as they may be, acceptance may cause career suicide. During the past 20 years, I've seen only isolated incidents in which an accepted counteroffer has benefited the employee. Consider the problem in its proper perspective.

What really goes through a boss's mind when someone quits?

- "This couldn't happen at a worse time."
- "This is one of my best people. If I let him/her quit now, it'll wreak havoc on the morale of the department."
- "I've already got one opening in my department. I don't need another right now."
- "I'm working as hard as I can, and I don't need to do his/her work, too."
- "If I lose another good employee, the company might decide to 'lose' me, too."
- "My review is coming up and this will make me look bad."
- "Maybe I can keep him/her on until I find a suitable replacement."

What will the boss say to keep you in the nest? Some of these comments are common:

- "I'm really shocked. I thought you were as happy with us as we are with you. Let's discuss it before you make your final decision."
- "Aw gee, I've been meaning to tell you about the great plans we have for you. But they have been confidential until now."
- "The V.P. has you in mind for some exciting and expanding responsibilities."
- "Your raise was scheduled to go into effect next quarter but we'll make it effective immediately."
- "You're going to work for who?"

Let's face it: when someone quits, it's a direct reflection on the boss. Unless you're really incompetent or a destructive thorn in his side, the boss might look bad by "allowing" you to go. His gut reaction is to do what has to be done to keep you from leaving until he's ready. That's human nature. Unfortunately, it's also human nature to want to stay unless your work life is abject misery. Career changes, like all ventures into the unknown, are tough. That's why bosses know they can usually keep you around by pressing the right buttons.

Before you succumb to a tempting counteroffer, consider these universal employment truths:

- Any situation in which an employee is forced to get an outside offer before the present employer will suggest a raise, promotion or better working conditions, is suspect.
- No matter what the company says when making its counteroffer, you'll always be considered a fidelity risk.
- Having once demonstrated your lack of loyalty (for whatever reason), you'll lose your status as a "team player" and your place in the inner circle.
- Counteroffers are usually nothing more than stall devices to give your employer time to replace you.
- Your reasons for wanting to leave still exist. Conditions are just made a bit more tolerable in the short term because of the raise, promotion or promises made to keep you.
- Counteroffers are only made in response to a threat to quit. Will you have to solicit an offer and threaten to quit every time you deserve better working conditions?
- Decent and well-managed companies don't make counteroffers. . .EVER! Their policies are fair and equitable. They won't be subjected to "counteroffer coercion" or what they perceive as blackmail.

If the urge to accept a counteroffer hits you, continue to clean out your desk as you count your blessings.