

There Is a Time . . .

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to reap.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1–2

This Bible verse suggests that there are “times” for every purpose, but for many people, it can be challenging—if not impossible—to know just *when* those times are. In organizations, there are times to stay and times to go, and since I have reached a decision for myself that it is time to go, I thought I would share some of my ruminations on the subject.

My mentor once advised me that nobody should stay in the same job for more than seven years. He qualified that statement somewhat by adding that a person can have the same title and hold the same position for longer than that time period if the “job” changes. His point was that if you are doing precisely the same things, are caught up in the same routines, and are struggling with the same or similar challenges for a very long time, then your creativity will wane and your contributions will end. However, if the job changes and there are different phases of the position, if the job has taken on fundamentally new aspects and challenges, or if the demands of the position are expanded, then it is a new “job” and the “clock” on the seven years can restart. There are certainly many talented and effective individuals who have served in positions for two decades or more, but my experience has shown that these are folks who are constantly in the process of reinventing their positions and creating their own challenges instead of letting the position define or constrain them. On the other hand, there is the old adage about an employer who described one

of her employees by saying: “He doesn’t have twenty years of experience. He has one year of experience twenty times.” In this latter scenario, the stagnancy of the employee’s behavior would certainly have a negative impact on the organization, and probably on the motivation and satisfaction of the employee as well.

The challenge is to recognize that there is a fundamental reciprocity in an employment situation—an exchange that must be kept in balance. The employee needs to continue to make significant contributions, adapt to new situations, and remain vital. On the other hand, the organization has the obligation to allow these new challenges to be possible and to reward the employee’s contributions. If either side becomes stale, or if the balance becomes uneven, the result is not good for the individual or the organization.

In an earlier phase of my career, as a young (probably overambitious) faculty member, I had a meeting with my first department chair about the staffing schedule for the following fall. He was having difficulties figuring out how to match the demand for courses with the skill sets of his faculty. In an attempt to help him with the challenge he was facing, I offered to teach a wide variety of different courses. He leaned back in his chair and said to me: “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but let me tell you that *all* of us have *at most* two courses in us. In your case, that is ‘Hawkins 1’ and ‘Hawkins 2.’ After that, any course you teach is merely a combination of elements of those two courses.” Although I was humbled a bit by this claim, over my career I learned that there was great truth in his analysis. Each of us has a finite and limited number of skills, abilities, and tricks that we are able to perform, and when those have been employed and used up, our work starts to become repetitious.

When employees have exhausted what they have to offer, it is time for them to move on to a new environment, where they can apply their contributions in a different and challenging venue. Or they can hang on and stay too long, to the detriment of both themselves and the organization. Unfortunately, we’ve all seen examples of the latter case, when it is time for someone to take another position or, if older, to retire. As a youngster, I was a huge fan of Mickey Mantle’s, but it was difficult to watch him in the final years of his career, when he had stayed too long. He did not perform the way he had in his prime, and he ended up damaging his legacy, causing his fans to wish he had hung up his cleats a bit earlier. Nobody should end a career that way. It is better to leave on a high note, and that is what I have tried to do.

I came to EDUCAUSE with the intent of staying five to seven years. But the first phase of the position involved merging two predecessor organizations into a single entity; then came a phase of ramping up services, programs, and policy efforts; then a phase of developing resources and services to support a culture of evidence; and most recently, a phase of establishing a set of steps through which EDUCAUSE will be a partner in developing efforts to assist in dealing with the “grand challenges” facing higher education. Now my time is approaching ten years, and I find myself starting to repeat elements of “Hawkins 1” and “Hawkins 2.” In my heart, I know it is time for someone else, someone with a different set of skills, to lead this fine organization into the future, with its new technological and policy challenges. It has been an honor and a pleasure to serve the community in this position. I hope I haven’t stayed too long.

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