

How to Know When to Leave a Project

Why Would You Leave a Project Before It Is Over?

There are many reasons why you might consider leaving a project, especially if you are an external consultant. For example, major changes in your clients’ organization might make it extremely difficult for you to finish the project, such as your client no longer having sufficient funds to pay you. Or, you might have become quite ill.

However, it is rare that reasons for leaving a project are that straightforward. Instead, reasons are usually less clear, for example, you might be faced with leaving because:

- You have encountered sustained resistance from various members of your client’s organization, regardless of your various attempts to address that resistance and, as a result, there is decreased likelihood of project success.
- The quality of your relationship with your client has greatly deteriorated, for example, you experience ongoing conflicts and little trust, even though the project seems to be progressing in terms of addressing problems in the organization.
- You encounter unethical practices or other activities that are directly in conflict with your values.

Considerations If You Choose to Leave

We often learn the most from our mistakes, from our major challenges in life and work. Therefore, be careful about concluding that you should leave the project. Consider the following questions.

1. **If you are working with another service provider, have you involved them?**
For example, if you are working for a service provider, then you should immediately notify the provider of your concerns. The provider may be the party ultimately and legally responsible for performing according to the terms of the contract, so they must be told as soon as possible about any issues. The provider may be able to help you with some ideas to improve the situation.
2. **Have you really tried hard to address your issues with your client?**
What have you done to manage your stress management lately? For example, have you had an authentic discussion with your client about your concerns? What resources have you tapped? Have you asked any peers for feedback and support to address your issues with your client? What else might you still do?
3. **What is in your contract with your client?**
Contracts often specify the terms of project termination, for example, “Either party can terminate this contract with at least 30 days written notice to the other party.” Are there other clauses that pertain, for example, clauses about penalties or reimbursement for damages.
4. **What will be the impact on your client’s organization?**
Realize that the effects might be dramatic. For example, members of the organization might conclude that their problem is so hopeless that you chose to leave the organization. What

would be the effects of that conclusion? What project activities are underway in the organization and what might be the impact on those activities? Have you discussed this situation with peers to ensure that you are aware of any hurt or damage that might be caused by your leaving?

5. **What are the alternatives for your client?**

Can your client bring in another consultant? How would that transition from you to the new consultant occur? What if your client does nothing? Are there actions that you can recommend that your client can undertake in the short-term? Long-term?

6. **What if the client fights hard to make you stay?**

It is surprising how often we can assume that others have the same perceptions and feelings as we do about an event, especially when our perceptions are clear and feelings are strong. Unless you have had an authentic discussion with your client, you should be aware that your client could have any kind of reaction to your intention to leave, even if you believe that your client really wants you to go. How will your client respond to your intentions to leave and how do you know?

7. **How might this affect your reputation?**

One of the most important assets of any consultant is his or her reputation. It is surprising how small a local community of businesses and consultants can really be. Particularly, if your client has strong negative feelings about you and your leaving, word could spread quickly, causing substantial damage to your reputation and credibility as a consultant.

8. **What can you learn from this situation?**

How did you get yourself in this situation in the first place? What could you have done differently? What might you do differently in the future? Is there any learning that you can share with your client? If so, be careful to offer it as feedback from you, not as judgments about them.

If you have thoroughly addressed the above-listed questions and still decide to leave the project, then if you are working for a provider, termination should be according to their preferences. If you are not working for a provider, promptly comply with the terms of your contract, for example, submit a written letter of termination to your client. Be sure to copy at least two people in your client’s organization. Do not go into extended analysis of the cause of your leaving. Instead, mention “for personal reasons” or “because I can no longer be useful in helping the client.”