

Abrupt change can be as serious as a heart attack

by Michael Kinsman

I can't imagine that I will ever see a more pronounced case of an attempted career suicide than I saw last week. It happened in front of me and was so graphic that it almost seemed like a Greek tragedy unfolding in real time.

Here are the quick facts:

Hank, 53, is given a work assignment he doesn't like, one he thinks is not suited to his talents.

He decides to quit a 27-year career on the spot and start a new one.

He agrees to stay one more week in his current job.

He shares the news with his colleagues, who gather around his desk to stare as if a Martian just walked in and sat down.

He announces that he also is getting divorced.

He admits that his new career is a loosely formed group of ideas of how he can put his talents to work in a fulfilling career.

He has no idea when or where his next paycheck will come from.

He, his estranged wife and his 10-year-old daughter will be left without medical insurance.

He reveals that the next day is the anniversary of a heart attack he suffered six years ago.

Red flags were waving everywhere.

Hank's colleagues are dumbfounded. They want to be supportive, but they can't believe what they were hearing.

Hank says he wants to make a clean break. He wants to get on with the rest of his life. He isn't one to do anything halfhearted and he just can't devote his full enthusiasm to this new job, he says.

It is time to leave. The sooner the better.

One by one, Hank's colleagues speak up.

They are concerned that he is rushing into something he hasn't totally thought out. Slow down and get your business ideas together, refine them and then leave.

They tell him he is jumping off a cliff without a parachute.

They tell him, he can't leave his daughter without medical coverage.

They tell him it is reckless behavior for someone who is so smart and so good at what he does.

Hank is having none of it.

"I appreciate that you are all so concerned, but I really have made up my mind," he says. "I just can't stay."

The following day Hank is nowhere to be found. He's taken the day off to ponder his life, six years to the day after he nearly died because of a heart attack.

His co-workers spend the day discussing ways of talking him out of quitting so abruptly. Everyone agrees he is a brave man with great integrity to just walk away and choose to build a new career from the ground up.

Still, it is a mistake.

Everyone knows but Hank.

When he returns the next day, several people are ready to mount renewed arguments to stay.

Those arguments aren't needed.

"Well, I've reconsidered my plan to leave right away," Hank says to someone over the phone. "My colleagues here sort of did a group intervention and they persuaded me that I should stay a few months longer until I have a firmer plan. When they were talking, I heard a lot of people who cared about me."

Hank is still on the job, at least for a few more months.

His friends spoke out and he listened. But they only spoke out because they respected and cared for their co-worker.

Abrupt change can be as serious as a heart attack by Michael Kinsman