**The Art of Saying a Professional Goodbye**

by Ed Batista

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May 07, 2014

Saying “goodbye” is one of those activities that seems so simple it hardly requires advance thought — and so endings creep up on us and catch us unprepared. We tend to default to our habitual responses whether or not they’ve been effective in the past. As a result we often miss opportunities to enjoy truly meaningful endings — instead they’re rushed and poorly planned — or we skip over them entirely, casting the old aside as we race toward the new.

But at certain times of the year, such as the graduation season that’s about to begin, we’re compelled to give more thought than usual to endings. And in our work lives, we’re saying goodbye with increasing frequency as well, as more work is conducted in ad hoc teams that assemble for a single project and then dissolve.

As an executive coach I’m constantly in the process of beginning and ending relationships. In my private practice I typically see clients for a period of months, rarely for longer than a year, and in my work with MBA students at Stanford I meet an entirely new group of people every 10 weeks. Between the two there’s a steady stream of hellos and goodbyes in my life. (Because of my academic calendar, the beginning of March is particularly intense in this regard — every year at that time I typically end nearly 20 groups and coaching relationships in a span of 10 days.) It can be draining, but I’ve learned how to manage the process to make it meaningful without being overwhelming. Here are five principles that work for me:

**1. Understand your needs.**We all have different needs when it comes to ending relationships, influenced by our formative experiences, cultural background, and professional training, and it’s important to understand not only the needs of the other people in the relationship, but also our personal needs. That understanding is essential to crafting an ending that works well for all parties, of course, but it’s also a critical step in determining whether our own needs and preferences are helpful or should be modified in some way. I once rushed past endings, sometimes to avoid the strong emotions they evoked and sometimes simply because I was eager to move on to the next thing. But that could put me out of step with the people around me, and it’s been valuable to challenge my preferences and be more flexible about them to ensure that the experience is fulfilling for others.

**2. Mark the occasion.**Some kind of formal denotation is essential to an ending, even if it’s simply saying, “Well, this is it.” The absence of a denoted ending leaves a sense of uncertainty that can be highly problematic: Are we *really* saying goodbye? Just what does this transition signify? What will happen on the other side? The difficult emotions stirred up by endings can make us reluctant to formally mark the occasion, but that’s precisely why we should. Rituals, even simple ones, are important ways to acknowledge and deal with these emotions. I’m not suggesting that we need to mark every ending with a complex ceremonial procedure; that’s not appropriate for every group or relationship. But do *something.*

**3. Share the work.**Endings work best when everyone involved has a feeling of ownership and agency in the experience. If at all possible, the people participating should have a degree of choice in the nature, timing, and duration of the activities. This doesn’t necessarily require a collective decision-making process or a unified consensus. Sometimes, that’s simply infeasible. But particularly when we’re in a leadership position or another differentiated role we can feel that it’s our individual obligation to orchestrate the ending. With the best of intentions we can take over the process in a way that leaves others feeling disregarded. We’re probably thinking more about the ending than are the others — and thinking about it sooner than they are — and we may well have a unique perspective that should inform the ending. But the more everyone involved feels a collective sense of responsibility for the experience, the more successful it will be. So if we need to make independent decisions as leaders about the nature of the ending, it’s important that the ending we choose provides the other parties with opportunities to be active participants rather than passive observers.

**4. Manage the emotion.**Endings are — and should be — emotional experiences. The ability to express and share the emotions that are stirred up by an ending help ensure that an actual ending occurs. In the absence of overt expressions of emotion, we can feel that something important was left unsaid, contributing to a lack of closure and heightening feelings of loss or regret. But again, it’s critical to recognize our differences in this regard. Some people are going to feel more emotional than others, and it’s important to make room for a range of expression. If people feel teary, it should be OK for them to cry — and if people don’t feel teary, it should be OK for them not to cry. Emotion management is a critical function of rituals; by design they heighten our feelings and legitimize a fuller range of emotional responses, while also putting some useful boundaries in place that help us contain those emotions, conclude the experience, and move on.

**5. Accept — and prepare for — the letdown.**Even when we handle an ending perfectly, it’s common, and healthy, to feel a sense of depletion when it’s truly over. Our reluctance to acknowledge endings can stem from our resistance to these feelings. William Bridges, in his great book [*Transitions*](http://www.amazon.com/Transitions-Changes-Revised-Anniversary-Edition/dp/073820904X/ref%3Dtmm_pap_title_0)*,*said that all our endings and beginnings are joined by an “empty or fallow time in between,” and that this “neutral zone provides access to an angle of vision on life that one can get nowhere else. And it is a succession of such views over a lifetime that produces wisdom.” When we rush through this period to avoid the letdown we typically feel after a meaningful ending, we cheat ourselves of this wisdom. We’re better served when we accept the letdown, although this doesn’t mean allowing ourselves to become overwhelmed by it. Instead, recognize that it’s coming and prepare for it. We may need to spend some time alone after an ending, or we may need to connect with other people. We may need some open time on our calendar to look back and reflect, or we may need to keep busy and stay active. There’s no predetermined recipe; the key is simply being thoughtful and intentional about what will allow us to access the wisdom that can be found there, while we make ready to move forward again.

So what does this all mean in practice? Here are some techniques to use under different circumstances.

**To end a group experience that has been particularly memorable or emotional:**

* Gather the group in a quiet place where you won’t be interrupted. Ensure that you have roughly 1-2 minutes per group member for the ritual.
* If at all possible, sit in a circle, not around a table. Be deliberate about forming an actual circle and have everyone move a little closer to the center; physical proximity matters.
* Put a pile of small objects in the center of the circle, one object for each member. The objects should seem noteworthy in some way, but they need not be costly; I typically use small, polished stones used in flower arranging that sell for $1 a bag.
* Tell people that when they feel like speaking they should step to the center, grab an object, return to their seat, and briefly say whatever they need to say to conclude the group. The object is theirs to keep as a reminder of the experience.
* Emphasize that everyone will speak, however briefly, and you won’t proceed around the circle but rather each person will speak up when they’re ready.
* If you’re a leader or authority figure in the group, don’t go first or last; find an opportunity to participate in the middle.

You can modify this exercise to fit the needs of the group or the occasion. For example, at the end of a one-day workshop I might omit the pile of objects, because it can seem too formal for the event. Or if it’s a group in which some people may be reluctant to speak, I’ll ask the participants to go in order around the circle, which creates just enough social pressure to encourage participation without leading to a sense of overwhelm.

Another ritual that works well in groups in which the members have become close is to ask each member to come up with a question for every other member and to bring each question printed out or written on a separate sheet of paper. (I recently did this with some groups of MBA students at Stanford I’d worked with for six months, and the terrific questions I received ranged from *“What makes you good at your job?”* to *“What’s next?”*) The exercise consists of distributing the questions to each member, allowing a few minutes for silent reflection, and then having every member speak to the group in turn. Some people will answer a specific question, some will share themes that emerged in the set of questions they received, and some will simply speak about their experiences in the group.

In concluding one-on-one relationships I find that there’s less of a need for formal rituals because it’s typically easier for two people to talk freely about our thoughts and feelings during an ending than it is when we’re in a group setting. That said, it’s still essential to designate the final conversation as such in order for both parties to prepare and to acknowledge the transition.

**If you’re concluding a one-on-one relationship as a leader,** I recommend sending the other person some questions to reflect on before your final conversation. This will help them clarify what they’re taking away from their work with you and will generate valuable feedback that you might otherwise miss out on. Here are some suggestions:

* What’s been most helpful to you about our work together? How has my style as a leader contributed to these aspects of the process?
* Are there any ways in which our work together could have been more useful to you? Are there any ways in which my style as a leader was unhelpful for you?
* To be as effective as possible with others I lead in the future, what should I continue to do? What should I do differently?

The first few times you try any of these techniques you may feel awkward, but our reflexive aversion to feelings of awkwardness is one of the forces that causes us to fail to mark endings in the first place. In my coaching practice and in my work with MBA students I regularly encourage people to increase their “comfort with discomfort” as a means of better managing difficult situations, and here I encourage you to persist and not allow feelings of awkwardness to dissuade you from acknowledging important endings. With a modest amount of effort and forethought, we can develop the same facility with saying goodbye deliberately that we have for other meaningful transitions in our lives.