

Globe Careers

Words to live by: Write your own retirement speech

Thinking about what you'll want said about you, and spending your working life making sure the words come true, can dramatically affect how you conduct your career, **JOHN IZZO** says

With anticipation, you watch a colleague walk to the podium. You're surrounded by bosses, peers and subordinates who have gathered to bid their farewells as you head out the door to retirement.

Several will sum up what it has been like to work with you all these years. As they roast and toast you, you fondle a piece of paper in your jacket pocket. It already contains words that you hope will now be voiced.

Are they words you lived by throughout your career? Only you will ever know because that piece of paper contains the retirement speech you wrote long ago.

For several years, I have suggested people write their own retirement speech — a simple, one- to two-page exposition of what they hope will be said about them when they finish working.

And you should write it now, no matter how old or how close to retirement you actually are.

The idea is simple but potentially life- and career-changing: To proactively think about what you want to be said about you when you finish your working life, and to spend the rest of your career making sure that the words become real, can have a dramatic effect on how you conduct your career.

Why bother writing your retirement speech?

Most of us want to be remembered fondly by our colleagues. What's more, we also want to have the largest effect we possibly can on others while also achieving personal success.

Writing your retirement speech is a great way to be proactive.

The worst case for many of us is to realize far too late that our impact and the things we are known for were not what we had hoped for.

A CEO friend recently retired. At his farewell party, they unveiled a cake on which was written: "Bob, you were a great CEO, but..."

What was the "but..." all about?

The CEO turned to a trusted employee. He had been a great leader, the employee said. However, whenever he praised someone, he would say "You did a great job, but..."

In other words, it wasn't until his retirement that he learned he had made his employees feel nothing was ever good enough and many felt he did not truly appreciate them.

"I wish I had thought about what I wanted them to say about me more carefully," he later said.

In addition to specific career goals, think about achievement in a much broader sense.

So what are the elements to putting together a good retirement speech? Ask yourself these questions:

■ What kind of atmosphere do I spread at work? Someone once told me that people forget most of what you do and all of what you say — but they never forget the way they felt when you walked into a room.

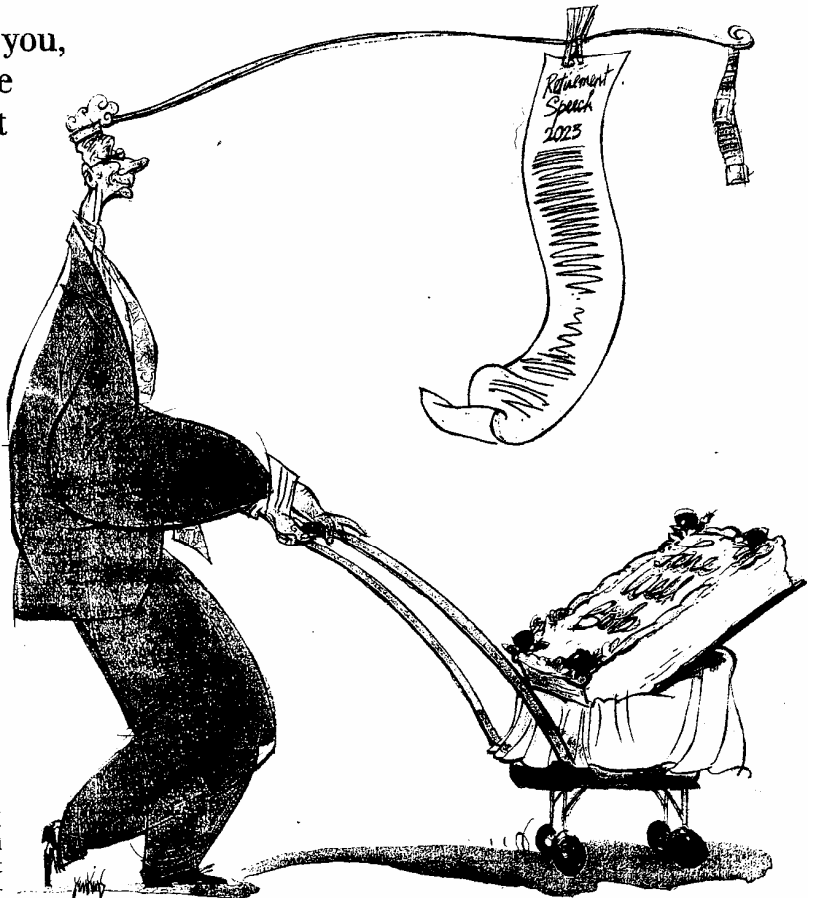
So one way to begin your speech is by thinking about how people feel when you walk into a room.

Do they get a sinking feeling or a lift? Do they hear a positive attitude or a series of complaints? Do they feel more appreciated or more diminished?

■ What do I give to others? So often, we focus on what we want out of our careers — but when we retire, what people will remember is what we gave to others.

Do you want to be known as someone who looked out for opportunities for others? Someone who found ways to give others credit? Someone who mentored? Someone who always sent thank you notes? Someone full of praise? Someone who volunteered for bigger causes than yourself?

See RETIREMENT on page C2



Write your own retirement speech

RETIREMENT from page C1

■ What do I stand for? Choose what is most important to you. Is it your quest for honesty? Your desire to be as ethical as possible? Your forthrightness? Your aim to always make others feel special? Your focus on challenging others to do their best?

■ What characteristics am I trying to improve? In my own speech, I have written: "He used to be so busy that you never really felt like he was fully present but, over the years, he slowed down and you always felt he had time for you."

This is an important element because we always know we have areas of improvement. It can be very powerful to name them. And more powerful, still, to see whether we are getting better at them.

■ What do I hope to achieve in my career? One senior human resource executive I know wrote his hope that every organization he worked for would become known as one of the industry's best places to work. Another salesperson vowed to be in the top 5 per cent at every company she worked at.

In addition to such specific career goals, think about achievement in a much broader sense.

When we focus on specific achievements, we often blind ourselves. For instance, as well as how far up the ladder you have climbed, also think about whether you are leaving your mark by taking on more responsibility or helping others move up along the way.

Or, as you gain more success at work, are you also making sure to have balance between your career and your personal life?

■ Take the speech seriously. Spend some time really thinking about the one key question: What do I want to be known for at work?

Don't write a lukewarm speech but one that will challenge you to have the most positive impact you can on others. Put yourself into the future and imagine that someone has been designated to speak for everyone who has ever worked with you. Think about what you would want each and every one to say.

And what do you do with your retirement speech when you are finished writing it?

First, read it aloud a few times and ask yourself if it feels right. Does it stretch you? Is it noble enough and bigger than you are right now? Could you imagine spending a lifetime trying to make it a reality? If you answer no to any of these, keep working until it inspires you at some significant level.

Then do what I do. Every day before you start work, read the speech. Start your day thinking about what you want to be known for.

Then ask yourself what one or two things you can do that day to make the words in your retirement speech come to life. At the end of the day, ask yourself how you fared.

Each year, review your speech and circle those items you feel confident about and those areas you should focus on for the coming year. Write down a few words on a cue card and carry it around to remind you of what you are focusing on improving.

Finally, every year or so, revisit the speech. Update it so that it always forces you to reach higher.

You might even consider sharing your speech with a few key colleagues or friends and ask them to give you feedback on how well you are carrying out your words.

Of course, there is an alternative: You could just wait and see whether they bother to throw you a party or what they inscribe on your cake, and hope for the best.

Either way, you are the one who will write your own retirement speech by the way you come to work every day.

John Izzo is a speaker, adviser to companies on corporate culture and leadership and the author of Second Innocence: Rediscovering Joy and Wonder.

Encourage others

You don't have to confine retirement-speech writing to yourself. Some leaders encourage those they work with to also write and even share such a speech.

Take Jim Grossett, vice-president of human resources for fertilizer company Agrium Inc. in Calgary, who did that recently with his team.

"My job is to help people become the best they can be. I wanted people to stop and reflect internally and look at where they were at this point in their life," he says.

"And I wanted them to do it when they still had time to make changes. Being asked to think about what you want someone to say about you when you retire brings that bigger picture into focus very quickly."

Mr. Grossett practised what he preached. First, he wrote his own speech. Among the highlights: he said he wanted to be perceived as always fair, always striving to do the right thing and wanting to be looked upon as a top person in his field who added value to his company.

Then he asked 40 employees to do the same. While they weren't asked to share their speeches, he says many did talk about what they had on their lists and, more importantly, "it caused them to think about what mattered to them," he says.

As one employee put it: "I am happy I did this now while I still have 20 years to work on it."

John Izzo