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Changing Direction

Lessons Learned From a Job Loss

Case studies of three people whose layoffs were inspirational

By
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As corporate reorganizations continue, countless talented, experienced employees are getting first-hand looks at the unemployment office. Even those who survive suffer. They're being asked to accomplish much more with fewer resources, all the while hoping their salaries (and the ax) won't fall.

Many lessons can be learned from this period of turbulent change. The most obvious is that career security is gone. It's been replaced by a steady stream of shifts in job duties, functional specialties and career directions. Change is disruptive, yet realistic managers and executives are learning that change often leads to personal advancement. They see that how they view a job loss or decimation of duties is critical to their future career success.

"Any kind of important transition can jolt a person into rethinking who he or she is," says psychologist Robert Lee, co-founder of Lee Hecht Harrison Inc., a New York-based outplacement firm. During the transition period, "you have an opportunity to reexamine who you are," yet not everyone takes advantage of this freedom.

After a job loss, for example, many people try to re-create their lost jobs at new employers, he says. Others go with the flow and let life just happen to them. "Those who seize the opportunity to really take a good look at themselves, however, sometimes reach new levels of personal growth and insight," says Mr. Lee.

Even positive or neutral events, such as the birth of a child, a promotion, an inheritance, a relocation, a benchmark birthday or a graduation may stimulate a serious evaluation of one's situation.

Some people respond very courageously to unexpected disruptions in their lives. The following three case studies profile people (all names have been changed) who learned important life lessons from their job losses. If you feel abandoned or helpless following an unforeseen layoff, their experiences may inspire you.

Not Part of the Team

Janice Beatty never wanted to fall in love again. This is how she explained her belabored job transition. Having become the marketing head of a glamorous, entrepreneurial cosmetics company, Ms.

Beatty lost her job when the company was bought by a major pharmaceuticals concern.

"They wanted their own team. While I understood this intellectually, I couldn't help feeling stripped of my identity, unemployable and lost," she says. "It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that, even though I was highly skilled, had made considerable contributions and had literally grown up in the company, I was no longer needed there. I couldn't separate my loss of position from a sense of loss of self-esteem and identity," she says.

A loyal, long-term employee, Ms. Beatty had literally lived for her job. She worked inordinately long hours, often canceling social plans and rarely going out to lunch with colleagues. By the time the day ended, she was usually so tired that she would

Not all unemployed executives are relieved to be separated from a confining and unproductive situation

buy a prepared dinner at the market, then head home to watch tapes of TV programs she'd missed. "So much for the exciting life of the female executive," she quips.

Janice Beatty had been an invisible contributor. Her projects were remarkable, her launches successful and her innovations creative, but no one in the industry knew who she was.

After her job loss, she felt emotionally and professionally derailed. She truly believed her good work would lead to security and advancement, and when it didn't, she felt despondent, angry and bereft of options. A workaholic who subordinated her personal needs to the demands of her job, Ms. Beatty had to rediscover herself before she could effectively search for a new position.

Like many people who are deeply loyal to their companies, she floundered at first. No other opportunity could measure up to her idealized former position. She undermined every interview by showing a lack of spirit and commitment.

As her search dragged on intolerably, Ms. Beatty sought out several consulting assignments as a way to regain her enthusiasm, gather perspective, increase her visibility and identify alternative work options. She was thrilled with the results.

"Becoming a consultant was the best thing I could have done," she says. "I hated the loneliness and missed the affiliation with my glamorous former organization, but what I learned was priceless. I realized I had been addicted to work. I had become so dependent on the demands of the job, on the reflected glory and the external esteem, that I wasn't developing my career or attending to my personal life at all."

Ms. Beatty not only discovered that she could survive on her own, but that she also could balance her life. Projects and deadlines that had always taken precedence over personal plans could be made the exception, not the rule. By consulting, she increased her visibility, got exposure to numerous industries and projects, learned about various corporate cultures and enhanced her professional credibility.

Now re-established in a corporate position after 18 months of consulting, Ms. Beatty has a different work ethic: "I'm still a bit of a perfectionist, and I tend to take my work very seriously, but it isn't my whole life any more. I learned by being in my own business what it takes to compete, the importance of visibility and follow-up and how to protect myself from anonymity. Now I anticipate the impact of my work, rather than just do the tasks," she says. "Sometimes, I even evaluate work assignments based on whether the particular project will add to my resume. If it doesn't, I'll often delegate or even drop it from my priority list."

For Ms. Beatty, an interim position helped her deal with the loss of structure, purpose and affiliation in her work life. She developed an intrinsic sense of direction and greater control over her career and life plan.

A Change of Venue

John Sherwood learned a different lesson. A rather energetic and creative man, he was always being told to calm down and work through the system.

"I didn't realize how frustrated I was until I left the company. I used to get into complex political hassles at work, and the only thing that protected

Lessons learned

me was my talent," he says. In his four years at a Wall Street-based financial services company, Mr. Sherwood totally revamped the international financial reporting system and launched an auditing strategy that saved the company millions of dollars. He also managed to make enemies out of almost every department head he worked with -even though his work was always respected. The result: He never received a promotion.

Mr. Sherwood started getting angry about his stagnant career two years before he was fired. He believed the company owed him something for his hard work and sacrifices. Although he thought about changing companies and exploring other career options, he had a tough time rationalizing what he considered to be a significant professional change. Instead, he concentrated on achieving greater successes at work and dug his heels in, effectively creating even more disruption within the company. He became increasingly isolated from his peers and management as the months passed. Finally, a new director was hired who wanted to build his own team.

When told of his termination, Ms. Sherwood felt

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more relief than shock. When he later thought about his former job, he realized that innovation and development were more important to him than maintenance and management. His apparent failure actually became a revelation: He'd outgrown his role within the company, and his strengths-design, development and implementation of new systems had been his downfall. In fact, his skills as a troubleshooter turned him into a troublemaker when he had to interact with management. "I realized that I'd undermined myself by putting performance above politics," he says.

While making a career transition, Mr. Sherwood concentrated on exploring opportunities that played to his strengths. His unique ability to be a catalyst for change made him more attractive to consulting firms than corporations. And as he networked, he found that his ability to develop contacts and get others excited about his problem-solving skills could

work to his advantage.

"In the corporation, I just thought I was unlikable," he says. "What I learned was that when I was free to create and consult, my strengths grew. I also found that I do better on a fix-em and leave-em basis," he says.

Mr. Sherwood realized the corporate life had been strangling him. He eventually accepted a position with a small, fast-growing consulting firm, where he quickly became a principal. Now, for the first time in his career, he says he's breathing freely.

A Lost Path Rediscovered

Not all unemployed executives are relieved to be separated from confining and unproductive situations. Some people, such as Daniel Walters, become despondent.

Unlike John Sherwood, Mr. Walters was popular and successful at mid-career. Unfortunately, his position was eliminated on the same day his first son was admitted to college. All at once, Mr. Walters had to face increasing financial responsibilities, a new life stage and a feeling that time was passing him by. Fortunately, his ability to work through this difficult period reawakened a long-forgotten dream.

Having been active in social causes during the 1960s, Mr. Walters worked his way into the legal profession to avoid the draft. "I never really planned my career. Everyone was going to grad school or law school to avoid Vietnam. I was swept along with the crowd," he says.

Despite his lack of direction, Mr. Walters was successful: law review, a stint with legal aid, partnership at a large law firm, then general counsel at a multinational corporation. When the company's new CEO decided to retain an outside firm, however, his model career was suddenly disrupted.

"For the first time in my career, I actually had to plan a move," he says. At first, he was immobilized. Since his self-image, social structure and family life were dependent on his work, his initial impulse was to launch an aggressive job search to secure a similar position. Yet he couldn't summon the energy to place even the simplest phone call.

"I was concerned about presenting a weak image and I wasn't committed to a specific career direction," says Mr. Walters. As he reviewed past work experiences, he realized that although he was successful, he hadn't enjoyed his career since his legal aid days. He relished the benefits of corporate life, but was impoverished morally. While he wasn't ready to relinquish his comfortable lifestyle, he was eager to make a change.

With his wife's encouragement, Mr. Walters took time to reflect on his situation and review his options with close friends and family. After tracing his successes in public law, private practice and volunteer work, a theme emerged: He was most

alive when contributing to the economic and political gains of disadvantaged minorities.

At about this time, a friend asked Mr. Walters to volunteer his efforts in support of a liberal political candidate. Although he was concerned that volunteering would distract him from job hunting, he intuitively knew that he had to restore structure and meaning to his life before he could embark on a successful search.

The project was just the motivation he needed. He was able to meet other prominent businesspeople and professionals, uncover community needs and speak eloquently about solutions. He gained greater visibility and a reputation as a politically savvy lawyer with extensive contacts and business acumen. In sharing ideals, values and goals, Mr. Walters became increasingly aware of career options he'd never considered. Through mutual effort and the joy of sharing a common cause, he communicated an immediate sense of his worth and broadened his network of contacts.

After the election, Mr. Walters convinced representatives of three major corporations to create an organization to identify and invest in minority businesses. He was made the executive director. Despite his concerns, curtailing his life style wasn't necessary, since he doubled his income in three years. He's now extremely satisfied with his efforts and is applying skills he acquired in previous positions to advance the lives of others. Above all, he's recaptured a sense of mission about his work.

"In Western culture, we often view change as a crisis and crisis as calamity," says Stephanie Gannon, a New York psychologist and consultant. "In Eastern philosophy, the idea of crisis is more expansive," she says. "The Chinese ideograph for crisis is two symbols: the word for danger and opportunity. The task becomes how to mobilize the danger and seize the opportunity."

Ms. Gannon suggests following five important steps when trying to turn a loss into an opportunity:

1. Review your past successes and evaluate your needs, style and skills. Write these down and examine the patterns.
2. Use your earliest memories to identify themes of what you enjoy and do well.
3. Objectively outline which traits help you succeed and which derail your efforts.
4. Realize that you must succeed in context. The environment you work in must allow you to be your best self.
5. Consider an alternative course, such as volunteering, consulting or teaching, as a way to explore your options and expand your contact base while staying active.

"The key to these three stories is that sometimes the real you lies buried beneath a pile of inertia," says Robert Lee. "A job loss can shake it out." .

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