

Conscious Careering



The biggest threat to your career success? An unwillingness to explore your own blind spots

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At last count, I've had the privilege of helping 3,558 people figure out their career goals and get back on their feet after the experience of a sudden job loss or layoff event.

In all this time, however, I find it amazing that I can only recall two distinct occasions when a client of mine had the courage to directly raise the obvious, but uncomfortable question: "Why was it that I was selected for the layoff, and not somebody else?"

Now don't get me wrong; most laid-off workers that I encounter do engage in a great deal of spirited venting and speculation about the factors behind their termination. In fact, some of them are *very* spirited about the subject! Typically, they will express a great deal of anger or sadness around their situation, then throw out a few superficial rationalizations about why they think they've suddenly found themselves among the ranks of the unemployed. The most common explanations are along the lines of "my boss was a jerk" or "I refused to play politics and suck up to the powers that be, so alas, here I am." There's also a common perception that age bias must have played a major part in the layoff selection process, with the company intentionally ousting older, more experienced workers in favor of younger candidates who will be more compliant and work for less money.

These kneejerk guesses and accusations should be recognized for exactly what they are—psychological defense mechanisms. They're the normal, natural, and healthy stages that people go through to help process the pain of emotional rejection. While they therefore play an important role, however, they should still not be confused with an honest attempt to uncover the true dynamics behind the layoff decision.

For this reason, I always urge my clients to take a courageous look at their own past actions and attitudes once the initial shock of a layoff wears off. Did they, themselves, contribute in a significant way to their current fate?

One of the reasons I take this approach is because I don't believe the criteria behind most corporate layoff lists are nearly as shallow or blatantly discriminatory as most "terminees" would like to believe. In my experience working with HR teams over the years, I've found that

most companies actually take workforce reductions very seriously and go through a thoughtful and sophisticated process to determine which employees will be chosen to stay or leave as part of an organizational restructuring effort.

This may sound like blasphemy to somebody who's just been handed their walking papers, but it's reality. Age, seniority, and salary are not usually the primary factors that determine who gets selected during a layoff event. The most important factor is usually the magic "A" word: attitude. Managers tend to retain the personnel who appear to be the greatest team players, willing and able to adapt to the corporate challenges ahead, and they tend to jettison employees who seem rigid, resistant to change, or endowed with an inflated sense of self-worth or entitlement.

That's why it pays to do some introspection if you've found yourself on the receiving end of a pink slip. As uncomfortable as the issue might be to contemplate, you need to determine whether you've somehow contributed to your own unemployment status so that you can learn from the experience and avoid repeating similar negative patterns down the road.

Let me share an example that might help illustrate my point. Several years ago, I was contracted to provide career transition assistance to a senior financial manager at a local construction company. "Dave" had been with the company for over 18 years and was clearly one of the most knowledgeable and talented employees on staff. Troubles started brewing, however, when a new general manager was brought in from outside the company to take the reins. Several months into this new arrangement, Dave and his manager started butting heads on an increasingly consistent basis, until the new GM finally called Dave into his office and asked for his resignation.

Now when I first met with Dave, he was literally seething with anger over this development. In his mind, his work was beyond reproach and his termination was unquestionably the result of a "rookie" manager who was insecure, manipulative, and unfairly out to get him. He cited countless situations when he felt the new manager disregarded his tenure, and experience, and intentionally ignored his advice. How could it possibly be fair, therefore, that Dave should be the one asked to leave while his manager would continue on with the organization? He said that many of his fellow employees confessed to him that they felt the same way, too, although they were unwilling to go on the record or be highly vocal about it.

I decided not to challenge Dave's view of the situation for our first several sessions, since the emotional wounds were still fresh and there were plenty of other tactical job search issues we needed to work on in the meantime. After an appropriate cooling-off period, however, I decided to return to the subject of why Dave

ended up losing his job. While risky, I felt it was immensely important for Dave to assess the real reasons behind his termination in order to avoid having history repeat itself in his next work assignment. I therefore asked him to describe the months leading up to his departure in more detail and to paint me a more complete picture about the interactions with his manager.

At first, he said, the chemistry with his new boss was actually quite good and the relationship was relatively cordial. Over time, however, he said the manager clearly began trying to make major changes to the way that the company did things, leading to frequent clashes with my client. Dave also said he felt a sense of personal obligation (as the most tenured employee) to step up and defend the status quo—expressing his strong opinion that the new changes being proposed were both ill-conceived and unnecessary.

After hearing this story, I asked Dave to think back and try to empathize with the position of his new boss. Was this individual bought in with the expectation that he would improve certain aspects of the department and achieve specific turnaround results? Was his performance and job security likely dependent on making these changes? And was it truly surprising that this new boss, as an outsider looking in, would want to put his own stamp on things—and might feel threatened by somebody, like Dave, who had been there for decades and had developed many of the procedures currently in place at the company?

Looking at things in this light, my client admitted that, yes, he would likely feel the same way if he were the new kid on the block and was under pressure from above to make certain changes. This insight then led to Dave's realization that his attitude at the time, while a noble defense of company traditions, was also likely perceived by his new boss as *massive resistance to change*. Although things started on a friendly note, the manager must have quickly come to view Dave as the single greatest roadblock to achieving his goals. Had Dave been a touch more diplomatic, or worked more collaboratively with the manager to negotiate the needed changes, he admitted that he would probably still be holding his previous job and would likely even have positioned himself as the general manager's right-hand man!

After this discussion, I saluted Dave for his willingness to see a new side to these dynamics and to understand how his actions, and attitude, might have contributed to the ultimate decision to let him go. It takes guts to look in the mirror in these situations. Our first instinct is to cast ourselves as a "victim" and assume that our employer must be totally at fault; it's much harder to take personal responsibility for how we might at times be contributing heavily to our own career setbacks.

In the end, however, I hope you'll agree that most disputes in the office don't usually come

down to epic battles of good and evil. Instead, they center around differences in attitude, priorities, and perception. Therefore, unless we confront these root causes, we will often set up ourselves up for repeated failures and a revolving employment door that leads to anger and regret, instead of personal growth.

Thankfully, with a bit of support and guidance, Dave was able to come to a much more enlightened understanding of how his own tendencies, personality traits, and attitudes had influenced his career success. The lessons appeared to sink in and he has now moved on to a new position, with a new employer, that appears to be working out wonderfully for him on many levels. While I'm positively ecstatic for Dave, however, I'm still rooting for more people to come forward of their own volition and express the sentiment that I've only heard voiced twice in all my years: "Matt, I've just found myself on the receiving end of a layoff; can you help me figure out what I can do in the future to avoid having to go through this again?"

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