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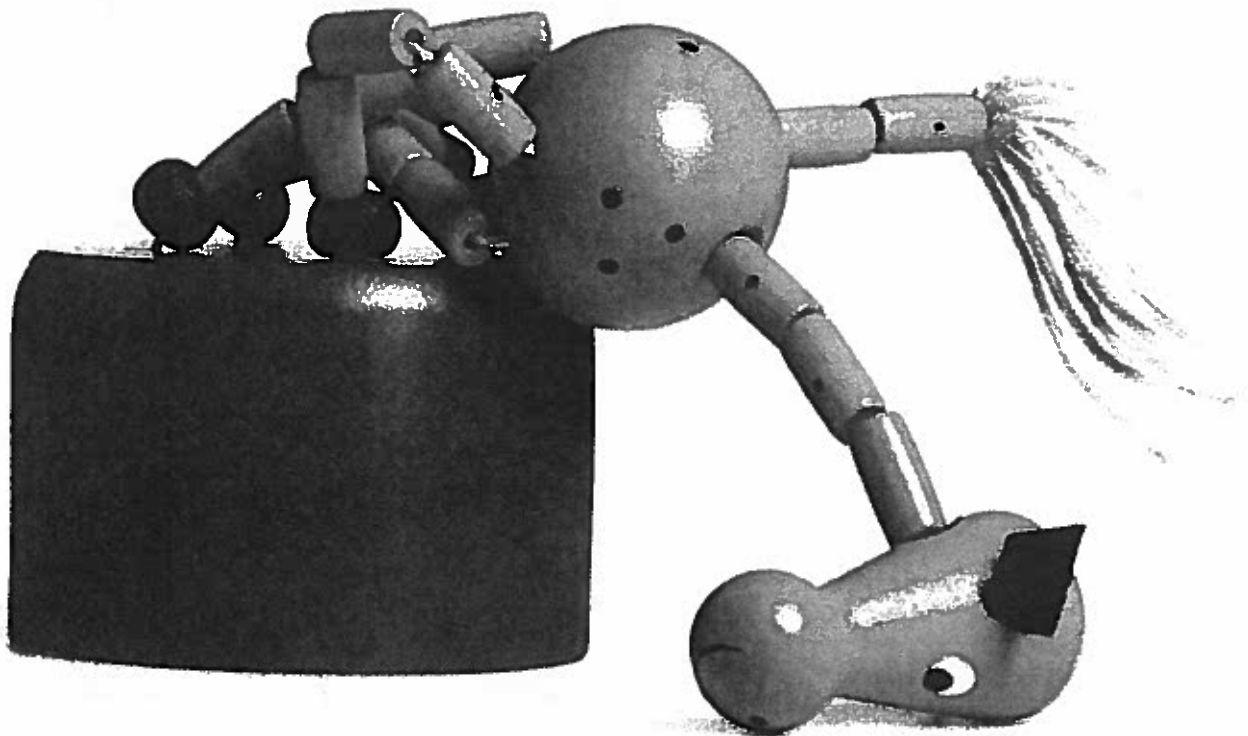
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Rebounding from Career Setbacks

by Mitchell Lee Marks, Philip Mirvis,
and Ron Ashkenas



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Brian was a rising star at his company. He advanced through several senior management roles and was soon tapped to head a business unit, reporting directly to the CEO. But after about two years in the job, despite his stellar financial results, his boss suddenly dismissed him. Brian was told that the company was trying to be a more open, engaged, global enterprise and that his aggressive leadership style didn't reflect those values.

Like most ambitious managers who suffer career setbacks, Brian went through a period of shock, denial, and self-doubt. After all, he'd never previously failed in a position. He had trouble accepting the reality that he wasn't as good as he'd thought he was. He also felt upset and angry that his boss hadn't given him a chance to prove himself. Eventually, however, he recognized that he couldn't reverse the decision and chose to focus on moving forward. None of the people working for him had objected to his dismissal, so he was particularly keen to figure out how to foster loyalty in future employees.

Within a few months, a large industrial parts company impressed with Brian's undisputed ability to meet financial targets recruited him to lead a division. The job was a step down from his previous role, but he decided to take it so that he could experiment with different ways of working and leading, learning to better control his emotions and rally his team around him. It paid off: Less than three years later, yet another company—this time, a *Fortune* 500 manufacturer—hired him to be its CEO. During his seven-year tenure in that job, he doubled the firm's revenue and created a culture that balanced innovation with a disciplined focus on productivity and performance.

Of course, not everyone can go from being out of a job to running a large company. But in more than 30 years of research and consulting work with executive clients, we've found that one lesson from Brian's story applies pretty universally: Even a dramatic career failure can become

a springboard to success if you respond in the right way. To execute a turnaround like Brian's, you focus on a few key tasks: Determine why you lost, identify new paths, and seize the right opportunity when it's within your reach.

Figure Out Why You Lost

We've interviewed hundreds of executives who have been fired, laid off, or passed over for promotion (as a result of mergers, restructurings, competition for top jobs, or personal failings). Often, we find them working through the classic stages of loss defined by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: They start with shock and denial about the events and move on to anger at the company or the boss, bargaining over their fate, and then a protracted period of licking their wounds and asking themselves whether

prevents them from considering their own culpability and breaking free of the destructive behavior that derailed them in the first place. It may also lead them to ratchet back their current efforts and future expectations in the workplace.

Those who rebound from career losses take a decidedly different approach. Instead of getting stuck in grief or blame, they actively explore how they contributed to what went wrong, evaluate whether they sized up the situation correctly and reacted appropriately, and consider what they would do differently if given the chance. They also gather feedback from a wide variety of people (including superiors, peers, and subordinates), making it clear that they want honest feedback, not consolation.

Brian, for example, had to engage in frank, somewhat painful conversations

Reframing losses as opportunities involves hard thinking about who you are and what you want.

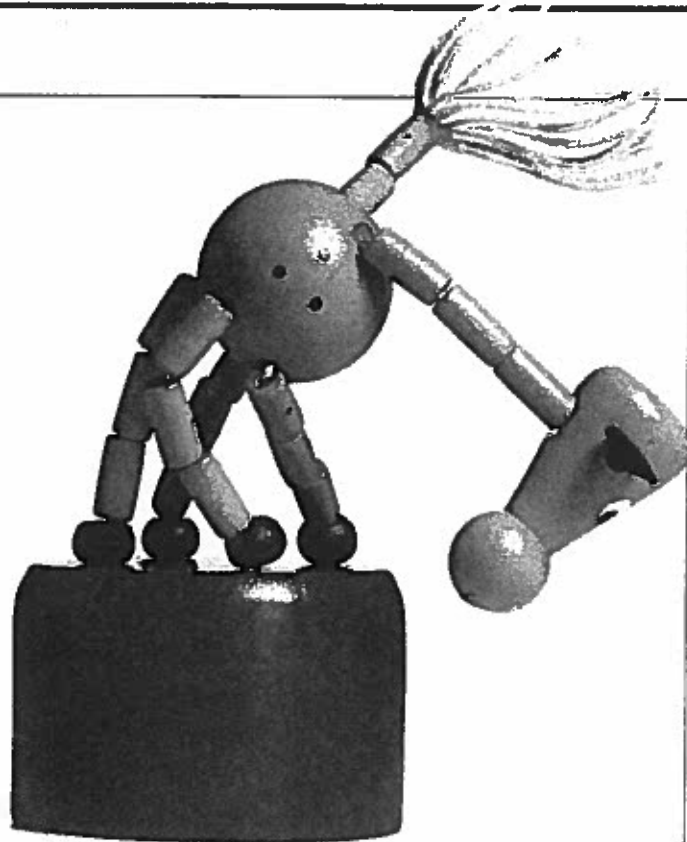
they can ever regain the respect of their peers and team. Many of them never make it to the "acceptance" stage.

That's partly because, as social psychologists have found in decades' worth of studies, high achievers usually take too much credit for their successes and assign too much external blame for their failures. It's a type of attribution bias that protects self-esteem but also prevents learning and growth. People focus on situational factors or company politics instead of examining their own role in the problem.

Some ask others for candid feedback, but most turn to sympathetic friends, family members, and colleagues who reinforce their self-image ("You deserved that job") and feed their sense of injustice ("You have every right to be angry"). This

with his boss, several direct reports, and a few trusted colleagues to discover that he had developed a career-limiting reputation for being difficult and not always in control of his emotions.

Also consider Stan, a senior partner at a boutique professional services firm considering global expansion. A vocal proponent of the growth plan, he had hoped to lead the company's new London office. When another partner was selected instead, Stan was outraged. He stewed for a few weeks but then resolved to take a more productive tack. He set up one-on-one meetings with members of the firm's executive committee. At the start of each session, he explained that he wasn't trying to reverse the decision; he just wanted to understand why it had been made. He



took care not to sound bitter or to bad-mouth the process or the people involved. He maintained a positive, confident tone, and he expressed a willingness to learn from his missteps.

As a result, the executive committee members gave him consistent, useful comments: They regarded his aggressiveness as an asset in the United States but worried that it would get in the way of securing new clients and running an office in the UK. His initial reaction was defensive. (“No one minded my aggressiveness when it landed key contracts,” he thought.) But he kept those feelings in check—and quickly came around to appreciating the candor. “It wasn’t that they were asking me to change,” Stan reflected, “but they made clear to me that my style got in the way of this opportunity.”

Identify New Paths

The next step is to objectively weight the potential for turning your loss into a win, whether that’s a different role in your organization, a move to a new company, or a shift to a different industry or career.

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and what you want. Research shows that escapism is a common reaction to career derailment—people may take trips to get away from their troubles, immerse themselves in busywork, drink or eat excessively, or avoid discussing their thoughts and plans with family and friends. While these behaviors can give you mental space to sort things out, they rarely lead to a productive transition. It’s more effective to engage in a focused exploration of all the options available.

New opportunities don’t usually present themselves right away, of course, and it can be hard to spot them through the fog of anger and disappointment in the early days after a setback. Studies by change management expert William Bridges highlight the tension people feel when they’re torn between hanging onto their current identities and expectations and letting go. Leaders we’ve counseled describe entering a “twilight zone”: The status quo has been fatally disrupted, but it’s not clear yet what success will look like in the future.

That’s why it’s useful to take time to test out some ideas for what to do next. One option is to speak with a career

counselor or engage in therapy, both to clarify goals and to work on personal development. Another is to take a temporary leave from your job to go back to school or test-drive a career interest at a start-up or a nonprofit. Pausing a bit can allow you to find new meaning in your setback.

Recall how Brian reacted when he was fired from his unit-head job: He began to consider lower-level positions that would give him room to tinker with his leadership style. Or look at Paula, whom we met while studying the resiliency of online advertising executives involved in restructurings. When her high-tech company’s new CEO launched a corporate makeover, Paula felt relatively safe because the European business unit she led had met or exceeded its targets for 11 straight quarters, and she had been promoted three times in five years. But then she discovered that her position would be eliminated.

At first Paula blamed everything from company politics to her boss’s failure to protect her and her team. Then, three months after the announcement, her last day arrived. She had no plans and didn’t want to make any right away. Instead she spent time examining her life and her career. She reached out to friends and business associates—“not to network” (her words) but to gain perspective and advice in thinking through her goals. She reflected on each conversation, made notes, and eventually developed what she dubbed “four themes for my next job”: She wanted to bring new products to market (rather than relaunching U.S. offerings in other regions), to interact more directly with clients, to work for a company with a unique value proposition, and to have colleagues she liked and trusted. Paula then tailored her job search to achieve those goals.

Seize the Right Opportunity

After you identify possible next steps, it’s time to pick one. Admittedly, this can be a little frightening, especially if you’re venturing into unknown career territory. Reimagining your professional identity

is one thing; bringing it to life is another. Remember, though, that you haven't left your skills and experience behind with your last job, and you'll also bring with you the lessons learned from the setback. You may also have productively revised your definition of success.

Research we've conducted, along with career specialist Douglas (Tim) Hall, shows that needs and priorities can change dramatically over time—as children are born or grow up and move out, after a divorce or a parent's death, when early dreams fade in midlife and new ones emerge, and when perspectives and skills become outdated and new growth challenges beckon. So choosing the right opportunity has a lot to do with the moment when you happen to be looking.

Paula's story is a case in point. Her list of "must haves" led her to interview for and accept a more senior position, as VP of international sales, at a smaller firm in the same industry. The job was located in the European city where she already lived and wanted to stay.

Brian, by contrast, took a significant step down, but he took advantage of the opportunity to learn to become a better manager. He developed an understanding of the triggers that had caused him to behave unproductively in the past and devised coping strategies. For example, instead of immediately pouncing on subordinates for performance "misses," he learned to have off-line discussions with the relevant managers. After some practice, the measured approach began to feel more natural to him.

Bruce, a senior IT manager at a New York bank that went through a merger, is another example. He kept his job in the deal's aftermath but was devastated to lose out in his bid to become the chief technology officer of the merged company. He stayed on through the integration, but after a year of rethinking his personal and career goals—and considering a variety of jobs—he moved with his family to Austin, Texas, and joined a small technology firm that became wildly successful.

Just as important, he also found time to coach his two children's soccer teams and pursue his passion for music as a guitarist for a local band.


Like Paula and Brian, Bruce did serious discovery work after his setback—and then acted with conviction. He moved to a new city, industry, and job that would allow him to recover and thrive.

For executives who decide to stay with their employers, the biggest change may be in mind-set or psychological commitment. That's what happened with Stan at the professional services firm: Having gained a clearer sense of how his colleagues viewed him, he embraced his role as rainmaker, better appreciating the income, status, and perks that came with it. He also found a new source of satisfaction and accomplishment: mentoring the next generation of talent on how to win new business.

Shifting perspective like this takes just as much energy as switching companies or jobs. If you're not able to dig into your current work with renewed gusto, as Stan did, you might decide to put more discretionary effort into family life, volunteering, or hobbies, recognizing that having a rich personal life can compensate for not being number one on your team or in your organization.

WE ALL KNOW the importance of resilience and adaptability when it comes to career success. But these qualities don't come easily or naturally to everyone, which is why it's so useful to have clear steps to follow after a setback. The approach laid out here can help transform the anger and self-doubt associated with failure into excitement about new possibilities. ♥

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