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JOB LOSS

Surfing a Sea of Emotion

“Oh, we had all heard the rumours,” Winston says reflecting on the announcement two years ago in the plant cafeteria ending his job as a production foreman with a major auto parts manufacturer. “But even after they told us they were closing the plant, I think most of us were still convinced that they would find a buyer or a big contract and it wouldn’t happen.”

Job loss is a journey not an event - and, it doesn’t end with new employment. The transition is difficult and filled with emotion. The outcome depends on how we manage the disorientation and emotional turmoil encountered along the way.

Loss of employment is an explosive personal crisis that unfolds in at least three distinct stages over time. The emotional trauma is akin to that of other life-altering losses like divorce or a death in the family. And, each of us reacts differently and follows our own path through this difficult process.

At first we are buffeted by wave after wave of strong emotions - panic, denial, anger, shock. This is when personal stress and emotional upset peak. “I just didn’t want to believe it,” says Margaret. For the first few weeks, Akim was convinced that any day he’d be pulled aside and told that the company wanted to keep him. A desire to shut the door, be alone and hide is common. At work and at home, fear and frustration may turn to anger and defensiveness. “I just wanted to scream at someone,” said Audrey, “And more often than not, it turned out to be my husband or daughter.”

Just when we need to be at our best to impress potential new employers and plan for the future, these natural, instinctive responses can be our biggest obstacle. But if we can recognize and manage these feelings to accept reality, we regain control and can determine the necessary steps to move on. But, this process is neither quick nor easy. Even if a new job is quickly landed, the emotional upset of job loss can linger at least six months.

Although the next two stages, mobilization and recovery are positive, getting through them can be just as tricky as the first. Accepting reality and identifying and mobilizing resources to help find new employment won’t negate the flood of emotions. Margaret remembers being hypersensitive, angry and judgmental, “You get angry when someone tells you they know how you feel - they couldn’t possibly because they didn’t live through it.” This is a time of maximum energy arousal, but at the price of vulnerability to both good and bad advice. “One of the guys I work with came up with what we thought was a brilliant idea to buy some of the equipment with our package and go into business for ourselves,” says Theo, but

“It was my wife who asked where we were going to get our customers.”

Deep down, we each want the fairy tale ending, the same job at the same salary that we just lost. But we can regain control of our lives by adapting to and accepting our new situation. We can let go of the regret, anger, remorse, and fear and all other emotional barriers that hinder our job recovery process.

The price of failure is high. If we don’t muster the support of family, friends, and local employment help agencies, we may remain stranded on the slope of crisis at one of two levels.

Failure to adapt and accept the new situation can lead to a chronic state of despair. Unfulfilled, dissatisfied we yearn for something better. Combined with resentment over loss of the old job and identity we sabotage our new job. As one human resources manager explained, “Yesterday’s Wanna Be’s become today’s Usta Be’s - bitter and hard to motivate.”

Some cannot escape the emotional pain of job loss. These are the walking wounded, stuck in a destructive cycle of disillusionment. “There was a bunch of guys that came down to the centre every morning and talked about how we had all been shafted,” Norman told us. “Finally I realized that they were just holding each other back and I couldn’t be part of it.”

Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

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