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Don't Let Anger Sink Your Job Search

By Arlene S. Hirsch

It's normal to feel angry and resentful following a layoff. What isn't normal is to be so angry you want to murder your former employer.

A Florida physician had intense revenge fantasies after he lost his job with a health-maintenance organization. He dreamed of blowing up his former employer's building until he realized that, while getting his revenge, he'd also be hurting innocent people. Once he realized this, the fantasy lost its power, and he began to get over his bitterness.

He later learned that a colleague, who also was laid off, remarkably had similar fantasies. This man had even contacted a hit man to bump off his former employer. He hadn't followed through only because the hit man was too expensive.

These stories aren't lurid fiction or Hollywood drama. Nor are the two men common criminals. They're respected doctors and family men who felt unfairly victimized by their circumstances.

Is Blaming Easier Than Grieving?

Although the degree of their anger varies, many people get "stuck" feeling bitter and resentful after a firing and can't begin to job hunt effectively. This occurs frequently with people who aren't able to grieve their job loss. They find it easier to blame their employers and to feel victimized than to accept what happened.

Losing a job is like ending a relationship or losing a loved one. Both experiences involve loss and require grieving. You also lose what the job represented. For instance, the physician lost his sense of himself as a respected doctor and his role as a healer and provider.

So when something this major happens, how can you resolve your anger, bitterness and resentment so you can move on to your job search? Here are some suggestions from counselors and psychologists:

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1. Grieve the loss. Give yourself time to feel sad about losing your job, says Diane Wilson, a Chicago-based career counselor. In fact, processing your feelings before moving into job-search mode may be one of the most important things you do. Otherwise you may inadvertently undermine or sabotage your job-search efforts.

For example, being angry in a job interview may cause you to make disparaging comments about your former employer. Rather than nodding sympathetically, a potential hiring manager is more likely to wonder what you will say about his company later on.

If you continue to feel victimized, you'll get caught up blaming others for your situation, says Mary Lynn Pulley, author of "Losing Your Job and Reclaiming Your Soul" (Jossey-Bass, 1997). This causes bitterness and cynicism. Instead of moving through your emotions, you'll stall out in a cycle of negativity and won't learn or grow from the experience, says Ms. Pulley, a Seattle-based workplace consultant.

2. Write it down. Recalling and reliving difficult feelings about your job loss on paper can help you to deal with the trauma, says Al Siebert, a psychologist in Seattle. This is especially important if you were hurt emotionally by how you were terminated. When writing, include all the things you would like to have said to your previous bosses but didn't, says Dr. Siebert, co-author of "The Survivor Personality" (Berkley Publishing Group, 1996). Keep expressing your feelings until you feel emptied. Do this once a day for a week and then whenever you find yourself reliving the pain.

A study by James Pennebaker, a psychologist at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, confirms that writing is an effective healing tool following a job loss. Dr. Pennebaker asked a group of unemployed people to spend 20 minutes five days in a row writing about their feelings concerning their layoffs. He asked another group of unemployed people to write about their daily schedules relating to their job hunts. In the months that followed, more people from the emotions-writing group found employment than those who were more task-oriented.

This confirmed Dr. Pennebaker's earlier research that writing down feelings is a good way to help overcome post-traumatic stress, stop feeling like a victim and begin to heal.

3. Stay connected. Don't isolate yourself. If you have few people to talk with, form a support group with other unemployed people where you can freely share your feelings, says Dr. Siebert. The purpose of your group can be practical and emotional. In addition to helping each other with job-search goals and agendas, you can talk about what you're feeling, what you miss about your job, your fears for the future or your anxiety about an upcoming interview.

In their book "Stress and Distress Among the Unemployed: Hard Times and Vulnerable People" (Plenum Publishing Corp., 2001), authors Clifford Broman, V. Lee Hamilton and William Hoffman conducted a study of how the shutdown of four General Motors plants affected the mental health of the employees who lost their jobs. Their study is a stunning portrait in how debilitating isolation can be and how important it is to maintain a social network and contact during unemployment.

Your network could include a free community- or industry-sponsored job-search support group, professional counselors, family and friends. You and another unemployed person can buddy up and help each other through the rough spots. Be careful that you don't reinforce each other's negativity. It's important to surround yourself with positive people who encourage you in your efforts.

Ms. Wilson, who often writes while sitting in coffee shops, found herself privy to the conversation of a group of young men who met daily for coffee after being terminated from the same company. "Day after day I hear them complaining, but the complaints never change," she says. "All they're doing is reinforcing each other's negativity. Sometimes I want to tell them they need to get on with their lives."

4. Think through what happened. Keep going over the circumstances of your layoff until you understand and can accept what happened. Welcome any lessons you can learn from it, then let it go.

A former manager of information technology who was laid off from a consulting firm in Chicago first blamed herself for not convincing her boss to keep her. Next, she blamed her boss for not understanding and appreciating what she did. She needed to keep reviewing the event until she realized the company had to pare down its IT function and no one was to blame. Once she stopped blaming herself and others, she started to feel less hostility about her former company and more confident about her abilities. Then she was ready to move on with her job search.

Find a safe place to vent your feelings and talk through your experience. Close friends, a support group or a professional counselor can help you come to terms with your experience and place it in a different context.

5. Train yourself to think positively. Reconditioning yourself to think positively can help reduce your negative thoughts and emotions, says Ms. Wilson. If you can think differently about your situation, you may see other possibilities for yourself. "When you've already written the ending to the story, your mind is closed to opportunity," she says. "You have to stop the tape."

Everyone who loses a job experiences a transition. But not everyone is able to transform the loss into a positive experience. It helps to look for that proverbial "silver lining." A layoff may give you the push you needed to rebuild your career on a firmer foundation. If you view a job loss as a learning experience that can make you stronger and more resilient, you will be ready to take advantage of new opportunities.

Give yourself time to reflect on what you've done and reconnect with what's important to you. Perhaps this is a good time to make a career change, go back to school or start a business.

A 52-year-old benefits analyst found that losing her job in a downsizing last year provided the wake-up call she needed to rethink her career path. After seeking guidance and doing some soul-searching, she elected to become certified as a financial planner. Rather than feeling defeated about the future, she's energized and excited about new possibilities.

Her story is a reminder that hope and imagination are the best cures. Losing a job doesn't sting so much when you can look forward to an exciting future.

-- Ms. Hirsch is a career counselor in Chicago, who has written several books on career issues, including "How to Be Happy at Work" (Jist Publishing, September 2003).

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