

Embrace Entropy: Tips on Conquering Career Disturbances

This approach can help you get through a layoff or other career transition.

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Downsizing and layoffs have adversely affected and will continue to convulse the lives of many chemical engineers. This article relates my own recent experience to provide a few guidelines and tips on how to cope with career transitions in general and layoffs in particular.

My experience

On Monday, Nov. 17, 1997, I gave a 45-min talk on careers in engineering to a group of very excited and enthusiastic eighth graders at a local middle school. One of my slides showed a few ways of coping with the changes affecting the chemical engineering profession.

On Friday of the same week, my boss asked me to attend a special meeting. I gathered a few binders and other papers related to the projects I was working on and walked toward the meeting room. I was collecting my thoughts on the progress of the projects. I was quite excited about reporting the results.

I opened the door of the conference room and was introduced immediately to a human resources representative. I was a bit surprised to see this person in the room. Anyway, my boss took a deep breath and in a low tone of voice told me that during an executive review, a decision had been made to restructure and realign resources within the company. This review showed that my function was not required. In simple terms, I was being laid off.

Of course, my first reaction was disbelief. Keeping my cool, I asked if they had considered me for any other positions in

other divisions; I was told that they had but that no suitable positions were found. I was given two weeks' pay in lieu of notice (time that I could use to focus on my job search), four weeks of severance pay, and outplacement assistance.

The first thing affected was my hunger. I suddenly lost my appetite. The first night, I kept tossing and turning. The day's events kept going through my mind again and again. A part of me was trying to figure out "why?" (The other part of me was struggling to go to sleep.). I had been with the company for about five years. I had been very successful and was promoted in April 1997 to a new and unique role. I was enjoying my work and my work was well received by my customers and colleagues. So, what went wrong?

This was my emotional self. The logical self was arguing that the company had grown rapidly and that some such mishaps were bound to happen.

The lack of sleep and loss of appetite began to take their toll on my decision-making ability.

In the meantime, most of my colleagues and friends found out about the layoff and were very shocked. Some offered sympathy and advice. Others avoided me like a plague.

One friend recommended melatonin (for sleep) and St. John's Wort (for depression). I used both, and melatonin seemed to work, at least temporarily. Although I had some strange dreams, I slept.

Within the first few days, I went through all the phases of denial, depression, anger, and acceptance. Within a few

weeks, I had figured out the type of jobs I wanted to pursue and contacted a few companies and headhunters.

By mid-December, I had had five first interviews. Then things came to a complete halt until second week in January when I had second interviews with three companies and two first interviews with companies not on my original list. By the end of January, I decided to only pursue a couple of the available options and finally accepted a job offer on Jan. 23, 1998. My new employer offered me a more strategic role and also a slight increase in salary.

Although my journey is typical of many who have gone through layoffs, the trends I observed and the lessons I learned are quite powerful. I am sharing them in the hope that they can be of use to others going through a career transition.

Immediately after a layoff

1. *Don't just do something. Sit there.* My first reaction was to look for a job right away. The main motivation for this was to "really show" my previous company that I could quickly get any job I wanted.

Of course, very quickly I learned that this was not the best approach. The layoff is an immense opportunity to understand your true self and to find what you like and dislike. It is a great time for streamlining your life and figuring out the things that really matter. All these aspects are lost when one rushes in to a quick fix.

In putting priorities on different things, remember that stress is the feeling you experience when you perceive a gap between what you want and what you have (1):

$$\text{Stress Potential} = (\text{Want} - \text{Have}) \times \text{Importance}$$

I found the above equation to be quite useful in defining my priorities. I also found the computer program accompanying the book "What Color is Your Parachute?," by R. N. Bolles (2), to be very useful.

2. *Estimate the minimum income*

needed and multiply it by 1.5. Once you have decided what is important to you in your life, the next useful thing to do is to estimate your financial worth and estimate the monthly income needed to sustain your chosen lifestyle.

Get ready for a shock. I found the actual income I need to sustain my chosen lifestyle to be about 1.5 times what I thought it was going to be. It is very easy to forget many minor expenses, which add up quickly.

3. *Watch your internal dialogue.* It is important to distinguish between pain and suffering. Pain is real and must be endured. Suffering is completely avoidable.

Emotional or physical pain cannot be denied. The root cause of suffering, however, is our mental model surrounding the events and their ramifications. It emanates from our inner dialogue, which goes like this: "Why am I being punished? My entire life is ruined. I am a nobody. Why did it happen right around the holidays? What is the world going to think about me?" And so on.

It is important to get out of this victim mode of thinking and ask yourself: "What can I learn from this event? What can I do to make a difference?" (3).

Studies have shown that successful people are good at dealing with adversities. The recent book on adversity quotient (AQ) (4) presents "CO2RE" as the core dimensions for hardiness. People with higher AQs perceive greater Control over life's events than do those with lower AQs. They clearly distinguish between the Origin of and the Ownership (or accountability) of the outcome of the event. They limit the Reach of the impact of their adversity in other areas of their lives, such as their friendships, their fitness regimen, etc. Endurance is the final dimension of AQ.

People with higher AQs limit the duration of the event and its impact. Despite your understanding and enthusiasm, there will be a few spells of sudden depression. It is important to experience the emotions and then focus on the task at hand. I found ac-

tion to be the best antidote for these sudden onsets of grief. The action may include activities like calling a friend, going for a walk, or working out.

4. *Remember the Cs.* Many of us get used to the laptop at work. When you lose your job, you lose your laptop. So, buy a computer for home use. Have access to the Internet via an Internet Service Provider. After considerable debate, I had purchased a new computer just a few days before my layoff. It turned out to be an immense resource in my job search.

Next, in exploring career options, focus on your customers or clients, collaborators (that is, companies that collaborated with yours in the past), and, of course, your competitors. Your colleagues can provide excellent pointers, and career consultants or headhunters are another important source of help.

Conventional wisdom holds that most people do not find a job by responding to newspaper advertisements. But, two of my interviews were the result of my responding to a newspaper advertisement and meeting someone at a job fair that was advertised in the newspaper.

5. *Develop an official response to the question of why you were laid off.* Most of your future employers would rightfully want to know why you were laid off. You have to develop a verbal response that is honest, positive, and brief. Most people understand words such as realignment, reorganization, downsizing, etc. In my case, except for one prospective employer, most interviewers spent very little time dwelling on the reasons for the layoff.

Trends I observed

There now seems to be very little stigma associated with the word layoff. It seems that our society has put downsizing in the same category as taxes, divorces, death, and the second law of thermodynamics. Most people I came in contact with during my transition phase were sympathetic and quite eager to help.

Many headhunters call themselves management recruiters just because it

sounds more appealing. I found most of these recruiters are in the business of hiring project or sales engineers. For well-defined job openings, I found the pre-interview coaching offered by a few recruiters to be quite beneficial.

Most vendors are shifting their focus from products only to products and service. It seems that everyone wants to be a turnkey provider of solutions. I found demand for project managers to be quite high. There seems to be more interest in application of on-line technologies. The focus seems to be on billable hours and on project execution.

There is great interest in filling the layer between the distributed control system (DCS) and the enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. Companies seem to be facing tough challenges, because they want to preserve their core competencies while also adding new competencies to compete in new markets. Business process consultants, DCS vendors, data acquisition and management companies, and firms with expertise in modeling and simulation all want a piece of the action. A considerable amount of that work seems to require knowledge of systems, software, and programming rather than a solid understanding of the principles and practice of chemical engineering.

Most of these companies also seem to want someone already trained and experienced, rather than someone with a great potential and the desire and the talent to learn.

I found that most companies I dealt with had poor followup strategies. They said they would call after the first interview, but I did not hear back from them for weeks. I attribute this phenomenon to the rapid pace of internal organizational changes in many companies, our temptation to say the "right" things, and the implicit assumption that it is the job seeker's responsibility to chase the job.

Lessons for the future

For a mid-level manager, it is generally accepted that it will take about

four to six months to find an equivalent or a better position. It took me about two months (including Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays) to find my new position. My faster turnaround could at least be partially attributed to the fact that I was single and also because I was making the transition during a period of very low unemployment rates in the U.S. For individuals with families, I believe the conventional wisdom of four to six months makes sense.

Always keep your resumé updated. This forces you to pay attention to your real achievements and the need for developing new transferable skills. Continuous learning is critical. Yesterday's DOS experts are today's

nobodies unless they have continuously upgraded their skills.

Andy Grove, the CEO of Intel Corp., said "Only the paranoid survive" (5). In my opinion, to go from survival to success, you have to embrace paranoia.

Those who are in harmony with uncertainty are the ones who will be successful. The future job market changes will demonstrate that our perception of the events is as important as the events themselves. The real challenge in the future will be to be able to focus wholeheartedly on the task at hand while accepting uncertainty. It will mean doing something not solely based on the fruits of your labor. Rather, it will mean doing something because you believe in it and because it gives joy to you and to the people around you.

Some people find it difficult to believe in miracles. Engineers and managers, who like to always be in control, are disturbed by the idea of mystery. But, future events will prove that life is full of beauty, love, truth, mystery and miracles. CEP

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I am grateful to my customers, professors, and former colleagues who provided guidance and support during my transition. The opinions expressed in this article are mine and do not necessarily represent the views of Hyprotech. When in doubt, please consult a professional before making any dramatic changes in your life. Please consult your family physician before trying melatonin or St. John's Wort.