

The Emotional Aspects Of Job Loss

Few professionals experience job loss solely because a majority of elected officials decide, "It's time for a change." Yet, what is often an impulsive decision or reaction on the part of a council or commission is a traumatic event to local government administrators or managers who are fired, as well as to their families, friends, and employees.

Knowing that job loss is a possibility you accepted when you chose the profession is of some solace, as is the knowledge that it has happened to other good managers. Equally helpful is having the support that invariably comes from other association members. Nonetheless, losing a job is a real loss—personally, psychologically, and often, financially.

In this article we want to talk about the emotional aspects of job loss, ways of preparing for and dealing with that loss, and to suggest some resources to aid you during the transition.

Emotional Realities of Job Loss

Change always equals psychological loss. The loss is the loss of structure. Structure might be in the form of work identity and work roles, or in lost values, traditions, reputation, or ideals. Yet, structure is what gives life meaning, predictability, support, and purpose.

Losing a job can create a profound sense of loss. For most of us, work is a major source of our identity. When we meet someone the second most frequently asked question after "what is your name?" is "what do you do?" Our

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work identity helps establish our sense of worth, where we fit in the hierarchy of social status and achievement, and how others view us. Job loss represents a threat to our self-esteem. For many people the statement "I am my work" is an accurate description. This, of course, leads to an unbalanced view of the importance of work to one's self-esteem.

One of the dimensions of job loss at any age is the loss of the work family. Most of us spend more time with our work families than with our real families. The bonds that develop can be powerful and a real source of strength. When job loss occurs, often the real family ties need to be strengthened to provide increased support during this transitional period. Losing a job includes losing power, salary, and status, as well as a sense of belonging. It is usually felt to be a narcissistic injury and leads to disappointment. Facing disappointment seems to be a catalyst for positive change or a permanent retardant of growth. The key challenge is facing the disappointment.

Dealing With Job Loss

It is critically important to differentiate self from work-self. We are seldom called upon to differentiate between the two until such an event as job loss occurs. Losing a job can be a devastating experience, but also can lead to new growth opportunities and a better sense of balance and control in one's life. It is critically important that good leaders learn to manage disappointment as well as success.

Suzanne Kobasa, Salvatore Maddi, and Stephen Kahn researched individuals who tended to cope best with loss in their lives. Through their work they defined a "Hardy Personality"—an individual who has a sense of challenge, commitment, and control. The challenge, commitment, and control were not necessarily found to be expressed or realized in

terms of their immediate jobs, but rather, in more global or altruistic terms.

"The commitment disposition is expressed as a tendency to involve oneself in (rather than experience alienation from) whatever one is doing or encounters."

"The control disposition is expressed as a tendency to feel and act as if one is influential (rather than helpless) in the face of the various contingencies of life."

"The challenge disposition is expressed as the belief that change rather than stability is normal in life and that the anticipation of changes are interesting incentives to growth rather than threats to security."

Kobasa, and others, also researched and reported on the importance of social supports in one's lives as a critical factor in dealing with loss and disappointment. Such support can be from family, friends, colleagues, associates, and church or neighborhood groups. The essential ingredient in evaluating social support groups is the ingredient of caring—caring for and being cared for.

Closely associated with the value of social supports is the value of talking with others for whom we care. Talking helps to clarify the issues. Most of us think in jumbled thoughts and phrases, not in coherent sentences and paragraphs. Explaining your feelings to another person gives them form and structure and, therefore, leads to a greater sense of self-control. Also, it is a relief to talk about feelings. A real ventilating effect occurs, which helps reduce the internal pressures. Talking helps us gain emotional distance and makes us less likely to react impulsively. The hurt and anger over job loss are tempting to put into action, which we might later regret. Talking is how we test reality. By talking to people whom we trust and respect we can get a better fix on whether our reactions are per-

ceived as reasonable by others, or whether we are part of the problem.

Preparing for the Possibility of Job Loss

Since job loss is likely to occur to city and county managers during their careers—and everyone reading this article personally knows someone to whom it has happened—the question is, "What can you do to prepare yourself?" Let us suggest some strategies.

1. Prepare yourself financially, from the start of your career. Take advantage of the savings and investment retirement opportunities available to you through the ICMA Retirement Corporation and through other investment opportunities. Get personal financial planning guidance from a certified financial planner. Begin saving part of your salary at the start of your career. This does not mean you need to live frugally. It means a percentage of your salary savings should go into liquid savings as well as tax shelters.
2. Where and when you can, negotiate professional employment contracts that provide good severance arrangements. Such agreements should include severance pay, including health and life insurance benefits with rights to convert to another plan, for six to twelve months; and a maximum number of hours and/or dollars related to the severance package of transitional counseling, for you and family members, to help deal with the stress of job loss. One hour of personal or family counseling per week throughout the life of the severance package should be a minimum requirement.
3. Do not put all your emotional eggs into your job basket. Diversify your emotional portfolio. Job and career are important. Neither, however, will guarantee you entry into heaven, nor promote your spouse

or child to testify that you were "the greatest." You can get fired, without cause, for doing the best job possible. But you can survive by tending to your emotional, physical, and spiritual self, your spouse and children, and your other family of colleagues and friends. Local government administrators are a dedicated lot—and there is pride in that. But it is notable that governments continue, no matter who is at the administrative helm. Thus, one needs to keep job, career, self, family, and friends in a proper perspective, and to support and rely on those members who have been supported by and relied on you. Caring is the nexus. Whom do you care for, and who truly cares for you? Pay special attention to those people throughout your career.

Published Resources

Bridges, William. *Transitions*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1980.

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. (See book review in July 1990 issue of *PM*.)


Helmstetter, Shad. *You Can Excel in Times of Change*. New York: Pocket Books, 1991.

Maddi, Salvatore R. and Suzanne C. Kobasa. *The Hardy Executive: Health Under Stress*. Illinois: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1984.

Vaillant, George E. *Adaptation to Life*. Canada: Little, Brown, and Company, 1977.

Other Resources

Contact local mental health associations to find qualified therapists for individual, family, and group counseling.

Contact Jerry Johnson, M.P.A., and Nolan Brohaugh, M.S.W., at the Menninger Management Institute, Box 829, Topeka, Kansas 66601-0829, 1-(800) 288-5357, for referral sources located nationally. 

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List of Resources

Job Hunting

Government Job Finder, by Daniel Lauber. 1992. Published by Planning/Communications, 7215 Oak Avenue, River Forest, Illinois 60305-1935, 1(800) 829-5220. Lists 1,400 sources of vacancies for professionals, labor, trade, technical, and office staff in local, state, and federal governments in the United States and overseas.

Cities of Opportunity, by John Tepper Merlin. 1989. Published by the National Civic League, 1445 Market Street, Suite 300, Denver, Colorado 80202-1728, 1(800) 223-6004. A comprehensive guide to finding the best place to work, live, and prosper in the 1990s and beyond.

How to Win the Job You Really Want: An Indispensable Guide to Career Strategy That Shows You Exactly How to Plan and Achieve Your Goals, by Janice Weinberg. 1989. Published by Henry Holt Publishers, 115 West 18th Street, New York, New York 10011, (212) 633-0605.

Interview for Success: A Practical Guide to Increasing Job Interviews, Offers and Salaries (1990) and *The Almanac of American Government Jobs and Careers* (1991) by Drs. Caryl and Ronald Kranich. Published by Impact Publications, Big Oak Circle, Woodbridge, Virginia 22111-3040, (703) 361-7300.

Jobs Available (Midwest/Eastern Edition). A listing of local government jobs in midwest/eastern section of the United States. Jobs Available, P.O. Box 1222, Newton, Iowa 50208, (515) 791-9019.

Jobs Available (Western Edition). A listing of job openings in public administration and government research in Western States. Jobs Available, P.O. Box 1040, Modesto, California 95353, (213) 498-5419.

J.O.B., the Job Opportunities Bulletin for Minorities and Women in Local Government. Published by ICMA, 777 North Capitol Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002-4201. For subscription information, call (202) 962-3620.

Non-Profits' Job Finder, by Daniel Lauber. 1991. Published by Planning/Communications, 7215 Oak Avenue, River Forest, Illinois 60305-1935, 1(800) 829-5220. Provides details on hundreds of jobs sources for the nonprofit world, including education, social services, environment, research, public interest groups, and others.

What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Job-Changers, by Richard N. Bolles. 1992. Published by Consolidated Printers, Inc., 2630 8th Street, Berkeley, California 94710, (415) 843-8524. A practical manual for job-hunters and career changers (includes a list of career-counseling services in various cities/states).

ICMA Newsletter, published biweekly by ICMA, 777 North Capitol Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002-4201. For subscription information, call (202) 962-3620. Lists jobs available in local government.

Jobs '91. Leads on More than 40 Million Jobs and How to Get Them. The Complete Sourcebook for Job-Hunters and Job Changers, by Kathryn and Ross Petras. 1991. Published by Simon & Schuster, 15 Columbus Circle, New York, New York 10023, 1(800) 223-2348.

Bouncing Back: How to Stay in the Game When Your Career Is on the Line, by Andrew J. Bubrin. 1992. Published by McGraw Hill, Inc., 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020, (212) 512-5000.

Encyclopedia of Job-Winning Resumes, by Myra Fournier and Jeffrey Spin. 1991. Published by Round Lake Publishing Company, 31 Bailey Avenue, Ridgefield, Connecticut 06877, (203) 431-9696.

Job Loss

Is It Worth Dying For?, by Dr. Robert S. Eliot and Dennis L. Breo. 1991. Published by Bantam Books, Inc., 666 5th Avenue, New York, New York 10019, (212) 765-6500. Gives pointers on how to make stress work for you, not against you.

Resilience—Discovering a New Strength in Times of Stress, by Dr. Robert Flach. 1989. Published by Ballantine Books, Inc., 201 E. 50th Street, New York, New York 10022, 1(800) 726-0600.

Success Is Never Ending, Failure Is Never Final, by Dr. Robert H. Schuller. 1988. Published by Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nelson Place at Elm Hill Pike, Nashville, Tennessee 37214, (615) 889-9000.

Pathfinders, by Gail Sheehy. 1990. Published by Bantam Books, Inc., 666 5th Avenue, New York, New York 10019, (212) 765-6500.

This list was prepared by Elena Mina, ICMA librarian, Washington, D.C.