

PERSPECTIVE

What matters is how you cope, not the setback

OUR individual responses to career setback and failure vary greatly. Some of us deal with them and recover quickly, and others don't.

While there are career strategies that may help you recover even from a major career setback, there are also some "high risk" traits that make derailment more difficult to recover from.

Research conducted by Talentinvest shows that in all the cases of executive derailment studied among its clients, there were three attributes that differentiated how executives confronted and recovered from setback. They centred around the executive's accurate self-knowledge, a high level of learning agility (ie, the ability to adapt and learn quickly) and strong resilience.

Accurate self-knowledge comes from self-reflection, a habit that will help you develop deeper insights. These deeper insights lead to learning new ways of thinking. Here are examples of some powerful reflective questions you can ask to build self-knowledge, which in turn will reduce the likelihood of career derailment.

- What (signs/signals) am I not seeing?
- Why am I finding this such a struggle?
- How have I contributed to this upset?
- What pattern am I not seeing?
- What voices am I not listening to?
- What part of this don't I understand?

Self-reflection ultimately generates choice. If you know the issue, make a choice and get help early so that you can get a wobbly train back on the tracks.

Learning agility is tied up with reflective skills. Generally the more self-reflecting you do the more open you are to questioning your own assumptions, your own frames of reference and your own paradigms, especially when dealing with ambiguous situations.

Research shows that those who have not experienced failure early in their executive careers struggle to deal with failure later in their careers, resulting in the often spectacular failures at the top of organisations. This is because these executives have not learnt to recognise scenarios that could spell trouble.

They rely heavily on tried and tested practices or formulas, even as they face increasingly complex executive challenges, and even when the presenting issues may demand a different response. Faced with setbacks, these executives may often ask, how did I miss that?

Resilient people show the ability to make sense of adversity. Victims, on the other hand, ask, why is this happening to me? Adversity merely confirms their view of the world and carries no lessons for them. Resilient people can also build a bridge from the misfortune or difficulties they face now to a better and fuller future. This bridge makes the (difficult) present

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less overwhelming.

With all of these three "derailment immunisation" attributes, the key challenge is to know the issues, make a choice about what you want to do and then seek help.

We all have flaws, but they don't have to be fatal in a career sense — we have choices:

- You can learn a new skill (eg, how to engage others and bring them along with your ideas)
- You can adopt a new habit (eg, learn how to ask open-ended questions to open up a discussion)
- You can hire out the flaw (ie, you can hire someone into your team who is better at getting things done)
- You can move to a role where the flaw is unlikely to become fatal

To successfully master the setbacks and failures that are an inevitable part of organisational life, here are four principles that should underpin your choices:

- Know yourself well — know your strengths but also your limitations. Be realistic about what you do well, what does not come naturally and what your blind spots may be. Actively seek out feedback about the impact you have on others.
- Be open to possibilities. Find a better problem-solving alternative to win-lose. Recognise that your way is only one perspective, one business case. For every challenge there are multiple perspectives, several business cases that can be argued.
- Seek a purpose and stay focused — keep your career goals broad and meaningful. What organisational legacy do you wish to leave? Visualise success, the next big win and don't get pulled down by small losses along the way or give in to self-doubt the minute things get tough.
- Be an accountable problem solver. Own your responses in a way that helps you take control of situations you find yourself in. Resist the blame, victim or denial game, which is so easy to slip into when things get tough. Take personal accountability for the challenges/problems you face. Turn every upset into a set-up for change.

Most of all, remember it is not what happens to you, it is how you deal with it and what you make of it that matters. Career stumbles and setbacks can be temporary, if you treat them that way.

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