

Treat Setbacks as a Beginning, Not an End

By Patricia Wheeler

What makes it so hard to talk about failures and setbacks? In today's success-obsessed culture, stories about winning are what we want to hear about...and identify with. In our hearts, we dearly want to believe that our success is a steadily upward climb. Yet we all experience setbacks and disappointments, some of which are more difficult than others.

What's likely to be our "default" reaction to a serious setback? Many people follow the course of retreating from failure...taking some time to lick our wounds, as they say. Well meaning friends may even suggest that we do so. They may urge us to take time off, go to a faraway place, relax for a bit. Sounds good, but is it really?

Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, head of the Yale CEO Leadership Institute and author of Firing Back: How Great Leaders Rebound After Career Disasters, strongly believes that this is a crucial mistake. Describing a number of executives who have experienced catastrophic career setbacks, he suggests a number of actions to take- and not take- that can make the difference between permanent career derailment and a successful comeback.

What does he suggest? First, following a setback, one must immediately regroup and deal actively with the situation. How? Connect with your network of supporters. Make sure they understand the situation from your point of view. This does not mean portraying yourself as a victim. If, in fact, the setback was in part under your control (and many are), own up to it and apologize. Even though it may seem the world is against you, there are people who will support you if you give them the chance. Consider the experience of Bernie Marcus, fired as an executive of Handy Dan Home Improvement Centers who rebounded to create The Home Depot. Marcus describes the support of his close personal and professional supporters as key in creating the introductions and opportunities that led him to the next step of his career.

Next, redefine your mission. Remember the strengths and skills you continue to have, that have not disappeared due to the setback. Focus on the future and ask yourself how you will apply these qualities, and to what end. One man who demonstrates this course of action suffered a very public firing: former President Jimmy Carter, who lost re-election by a landslide in 1980. Carter rebounded by crafting a new "heroic mission," centered around helping people resolve difficult disputes. His humanitarian work over the past two decades has won him accolades such as the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Nobel Peace

Prize. Despite what anyone thinks of Carter's politics, he is a shining example of a man who refocused his mission and rebounded from adversity.

Sonnenfeld states, and I concur, that rebounding from setbacks takes effort, not luck. Remember the words of the great scientist Louis Pasteur, "Chance favors the prepared mind." So what can each of us do to proactively prepare for eventual setbacks, no matter how great or small they may be?

First, ask yourself: what do I know about myself, both in terms of my strengths and my blind spots, the latter of which are often involved somehow in our setbacks. Second, how are you proactively building your network of supporters? What actions are you taking to solidify your membership and how are you establishing your credibility with them?

I recently had the privilege of coaching an executive who knew he was being fired. One of the steps he took during our work together was to ensure that he took a clear and current inventory of his strengths and blind spots, and made sure he used this knowledge to take a fresh look at his recent experience. This was a necessary step in rebuilding his stature, connecting with people whose opinions matter, and creating the confidence to help him "get back on the horse" and out into the job market. He established and implemented a connection plan with his extended network. And he thought about his mission going forward.....how he wanted to contribute to the world and how this mission would benefit the companies who might hire him. Where is he now? Working in a new organization, carrying out this mission. And making sure that he keeps in regular touch with those who care about his success.

What are you doing to anticipate, and deal expertly with, setbacks?

Copyright 2007, Leading News

Patricia Wheeler, Ph.D. is a consultant and executive coach who helps smart people become better leaders. A recognized authority in leadership development as well as a trained psychologist, Patricia works with organizations to deepen and develop their talent pool to drive current and ongoing success. She and her partner, renowned executive coach Marshall Goldsmith, publish Leading News. You may contact her at Patricia@LeadingNews.org.