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PROFESSIONAL TRANSITIONS

How to Silence Your Inner Critic After a Layoff

by Susan Peppercorn

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Being laid off is one of the most difficult experiences that you can face in your career. As an executive coach, I've seen firsthand the shock, grief, and anxiety that generally accompanies this type of job loss. Layoffs can trigger a sense of powerlessness and self-doubt in the form of a scary lack of control and the voice of a relentless inner critic – particularly when others in the organization remain employed.

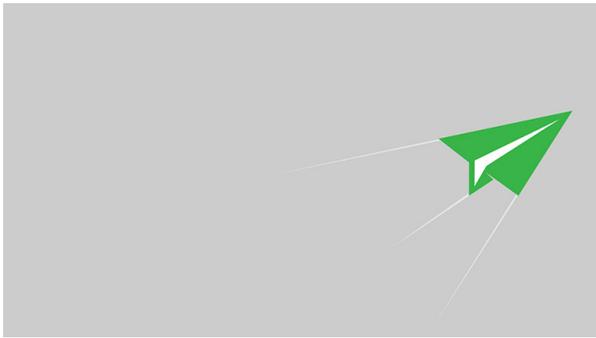
How you think about what happened plays a major role in how successfully you'll transition to the next phase of your career and life. While a layoff can be temporarily destabilizing, it need not derail your career if you learn which parts of the process you *can* control – specifically, the mental habits that you cultivate in relation to the event.

When I coach executives who have recently experienced a layoff, I've seen how some people pick themselves up, move forward, and eventually thrive, while others get stuck in a cycle of anger and self-recrimination. These destructive thought patterns keep them mired in negativity, unable to regain their footing and determine where they want to go next. Below are three steps you can take to silence your inner critic, build your resilience, and remain in a productive frame of mind after a layoff.

Keep a positive attitude. To bounce back after a setback, challenge unhelpful mental loops that reinforce problems rather than illuminate potential solutions. To see how your way of thinking can affect your recovery from a layoff, consider the radically different experiences of two 50-year-old biotech executives who I coached – let's call them Owen and Bob.

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Owen took the news of his layoff hard. While the layoff had been the result of a merger and not based on his performance, Owen continued to blame himself, wondering, “Why didn't I see the writing



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on the wall?” He convinced himself that his credentials and age must be to blame, thinking to himself, “I must not be cut out for science, and I’ll never get another job since I’m over 50 now.” Instead of taking the time to think through what he might do next, Owen spent most of his time chastising himself and scanning random job postings, growing more and more frustrated. When he came to see me a few months after the layoff had occurred, he could barely get out of bed in the morning. He didn’t challenge the inner critic that berated him for losing his job while some of his colleagues had kept theirs, and as a

result, spiraled into a depression.

Bob also experienced a layoff but took a completely different approach. After the initial shock of the news sunk in, he set his sights on new possibilities. He updated his resume and LinkedIn profile to reflect the fact that he was looking for work and then began to strategically reach out to his network. While doubts occasionally crept in and he was nervous about being temporarily unemployed, he continuously reminded himself: “I have marketable skills, and this change is an opportunity to investigate career options that I might otherwise never have had the chance to explore.” In a matter of weeks, Bob had identified several potential new job options, and more than 30 people in his network had agreed to play a role in facilitating his search.

The key difference between Owen's and Bob's approaches wasn't that one felt better about the layoff than the other – both were equally disappointed initially about losing their job. But unlike Owen, Bob focused on what he *could* control about the situation, refusing to let his inner critic rent space in his head.

Question your thoughts. After a layoff, it's completely normal to find yourself in the grip of anger and self-doubt, and these feelings can linger. Yet while it's important to acknowledge what happened and the feelings that go along with it, it then becomes critical to pay attention to what you are telling yourself and determine whether your thinking style is helping or hindering your goals. By questioning your inner critic, you can stop the negative cycle of self-blame that's holding you back from taking positive steps forward.

Below are some examples of common negative thoughts you might have after a layoff, paired with questions that you can ask yourself to help you regain perspective:

Thought: "I could have done more to prevent my being laid off."

Question: "What proof do I have that I could have prevented this layoff?"

Thought: "The layoff must have been due to a lack of skill or some other weakness."

Question: "How do I know for sure that it had to do with a deficit on my part?"

Thought: "I was unlucky to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Question: "What business conditions may have led to my job being considered redundant?"

Thought: "This is a disaster I'll never recover from."

Question: "What career opportunities am I now free to explore?"

Shift your focus from weaknesses to strengths. When you've lost your job, a common tendency is to try to figure out what you did wrong, examining your possible shortcomings or any perceived failure from every angle. As you home in on what you feel are your trouble spots, you'll likely also forget or minimize your strengths.

To flip this discouraging focus to a more positive one, widen your perspective to include your full career. If you are just starting out, your expanded focus could include your educational experiences to date. The goal of this exercise is to recognize that you've already experienced your share of professional setbacks (as well as personal ones, no doubt), yet you've continued past each past problem to achieve your present position. So think back to a previous time when you suffered another difficult situation that you ultimately overcame. With this memory in mind, ask yourself the following questions:

- What strengths did you use to resolve the problem?
- What did you learn about yourself in the process?
- How can you use these strengths in your current career transition?

In the master resilience training developed by psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania for U.S. Army drill sergeants, participants team up and overcome a tough military challenge by using the teams' strengths they've identified. You can use this same approach post-layoff by looking back on situations where you've persevered in the past.

With the right mindset paired with active questioning and follow through, being laid off offers the potential for you to thrive rather than nose-dive. The ability to set your own future course, choose how you view a situation, and build self-awareness of your strengths are just a few of the unexpected benefits that await you once you've worked

through the knot hole of your anger and disappointment. As a former client once told me after starting a new job: “I wish I knew when I was out of work that I would be happier one year later than I ever thought possible.”



Susan Peppercorn is an executive career transition coach and speaker. She is the author of *Ditch Your Inner Critic at Work: Evidence-Based Strategies to Thrive in Your Career*. Numerous publications including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, the Boston Globe, and SELF Magazine have tapped her for career advice.

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Suzanne Glicklin 3 days ago

When I was laid off a number of years ago, I caught myself in that negative thought process and now use this to remind myself just how irrational these thoughts can be. Every evening, the raccoons were tipping over our garbage cans foraging for food. I woke up one morning to discover that they tipped my neighbor's garbage instead of mine and my first thought was "The raccoons don't even want my garbage anymore." A few seconds later I recognized how absurd this was and when I start into a negative loop of thoughts again, I remember the raccoons!

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