When Your Career Hands You Lemons

by

Terry Whitaker
Director, Client Service
GP Strategies®
When Your Career Hands You Lemons

We all know the adage, when life hands you lemons, make lemonade. Better yet, add a lime, salt, and a couple of shots of tequila, and go for a full-fledged margarita!

But when thinking about your career, does the same hold true? Judging by the number of people who have been surprised by an acquisition, a layoff, or just an everyday “restructuring,” the answer is a resounding “yes!” Let’s face it, our business environment is VUCA—volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous. Throughout the course of a career today, almost everyone will, at some point, experience a change brought on by organizational shifts, layoffs, or even personal choices, such as a family move, a pregnancy, or the realization that they are simply not in the right role.

Still, it’s hard to let go of the idea that if we’ve done all the right things—studied, showed up on time, worked hard, and received recognition for doing well—our career still may not go as planned. Things that alter our career journey are called disruptions, and it’s not a matter of if you’ll experience them; it’s when.

That’s why it’s important to plan for “what if?” Because, eventually, it will happen to you. It’s like making sure you’ve got makeup on when your fortieth birthday rolls around. No one really likes a surprise party unless they’re prepared for one when it comes!

Here are some ways you can deal with, and even prepare in advance for, “what if?”

**Tools**
Things that support movement after the disruption occurs. This may include the development of new skills, the addition of some type of continuing education, or the pursuit of a work-related interest. Tools can help you develop professionally while you are in your current role. And while it can be difficult to find time to add new tools to your toolbox on top of your current job, the investment in new skills pays dividends. Like buffers, tools are great today, and they can be particularly helpful when disruption strikes. Tools can mean different things to different people, but it adds up to something that helps you redirect yourself after the disruption occurs.

**Strengthen Your Community.**
Networking is an often-used directive, but it can leave people feeling uncomfortable, and despite its helpfulness, many people avoid it. Too often, networking is a one-sided pursuit—it becomes, “what can this person do for me, now that I need a job?” The reality is that people are interested in connecting with you long before you need them to support a job search. If you aren’t making an effort to find out how you can actively demonstrate your skills and values within the larger community in which you live and work, you’re going to have a tougher time after career disruption happens. By establishing a community all along, you’ll have a built-in buffer and network of support to provide the strength you need to deal with career change.

**Things You Can Do When Change Happens**
Whether you prepare in advance or not, you can do a number of things to make disruption work in your favor and lead you to a better place.

**Overcome the Blow**
The first step is facing the disappointing reality. Whether you’re upset that you will no longer be with certain coworkers or you won’t get to finish a project you had underway, it’s important to take time to recover emotionally after a career plan fizzles. To help expedite the process, take the time you need to determine whether this is just a slump or truly a warning sign that you need a career change.

**Things You Can Do in Advance**
Preparing for unanticipated change may seem counterintuitive. But there are things you can do that will not only help you be more resilient, but can also help you in the here and now. Creating buffers, enhancing tools, and expanding your community are things that will serve you in good times and bad.

**Buffers**
Things that allow you to get some distance from disruption—things like friends, spirituality, yoga, sports, or whatever helps you personally cope better. Buffers are not only helpful for dealing with daily stressors, but they are also especially helpful when disruption happens. Buffers are like air bags: They absorb the blow of career change so you don’t feel the direct impact of the change directly on your core.
When Your Career Hands You Lemons

Back up and Think
Once you've decided (or someone else has) that this is no longer the right job for you, it doesn't mean the experience isn’t valuable. It’s essential to give yourself the time to fully reflect on what you’ve accomplished, what you’ve learned, and what you value. To process loss, you need perspective. And to get perspective, you need distance. Remember, jobs are neutral—it’s your values and how you’re perceived within the organization that make a particular role a great fit or a big flop.

Once you’ve really paused and identified your key values and personal drivers, you’ll begin to see what types of new situations might be worth pursuing. As part of your reflection, consider the job conditions under which you thrive. Do you need the social aspect of commuting to an office every day to keep you engaged and excited? Or are you more productive in your sweatpants happily working from home?

Consider What’s Going Wrong
To avoid making the same mistake at your new job, it can be helpful to figure out what fell flat. Did you get consistent, specific feedback on your skills and abilities from your manager and your peers? Pay attention to the views of others you worked closely with—sometimes they see areas where you may have blind spots. If you haven’t yet been the recipient of consistent feedback, now’s a great time to ask for it. But keep in mind you’re looking for their perspectives on your performance. You don’t have to agree with their perceptions, but you do need to respect the courage it took to share them with you. This isn’t the time to be defensive. It’s the time to listen. Gaining clarity on how others perceive you and your reputation at work is “must-have” learning to assist you in your quest for what’s best.

Take a Step Before a Leap
Making sudden, rash changes is never a good idea, particularly if you’re feeling desperate. Instead of getting so frustrated that you end up walking, choose a favored skill or value and look for opportunities within your current role to build up that area of expertise for the future. Having “transferable skills” means you can take them from job to job! For example, if you enjoy acting as a mediator when team communication breaks down, spread the word within your own organization of how you’ve improved team agility—and voice your willingness to assist if needed. You may find a whole new focus for the next phase of your career by exercising lesser-used skills while you’re still gainfully employed.

Any big change—whether by choice or by circumstance—allows for a new choice to be made. While scary, it can also be exciting. Having personal resources can help the process of figuring out “what’s next” feel a little less scary.

Life is always going to hand you lemons, so you need to make sure you have the ingredients on hand to create lemonade. Keeping your career pantry well stocked will help you turn something that’s bitter into a taste that is sweet.