

all is not lost

Sacked. Released. Fired. Dismissed. There is no way to make it sound good and, when it happens to you, it seems there's no way to make it feel good. But it is possible to turn it to your advantage and create very good results from a very bad day. Chris Sheedy reports.

Prior to involuntarily losing his job in 1996 Steve Bowler had been a human resources manager with a federal government department.

Despite the facts that he'd known a downsizing of his department was on its way and that he was well prepared for the dismissal, he still found the process challenging and a little disturbing.

"You're very confident in your own abilities but there's an anxiety about where you'll go next," Bowler says.

"It wasn't a surprise to me but for those to whom it is a surprise there is a feeling of absolute shock, denial, anger and frustration because a lot of the people have been workaholics and have dedicated 60 hours a week to the job. They've put other commitments, like family, in second place."

Bowler's story ended well – just a few days after losing his job he won a position with Morgan & Banks. Now Chairman of Donington, an Australasian outplacement company, he sees his 1996 dismissal as an extremely important milestone in his career development. But most victims of dismissal find it difficult to look at such an event and discover a positive angle.

Psychologist Dr Tim Sharp, who runs The Happiness Institute, says that dismissal for a lucky few comes as a relief

– they have been thinking of leaving for a while but haven't known how to make it happen. For most, however, involuntary job loss comes as a major shock.

"Many immediately think, 'How am I going to pay the bills? This is terrible, I love my job! How can they sack me?' The key variable that is associated with high levels of distress is something centring around the belief that it is not something they decided to do, therefore they are not in control," Dr Sharp says.

The results can be disastrous.

"If someone does experience high levels of distress the symptoms they might experience are negative emotions like depression and anger," Dr Sharp continues.

"They might lose sleep because they're awake all night worrying about the possible implications and consequences. What comes with that is irritability which might affect relationships. The person

might begin snapping at their partner."

Men's health Consultant Greg Millan says men in particular gain a great deal of their self identity and sense of self worth from their jobs, so when the job is taken away there's a huge social and psychological chasm left in its place.

"When BHP pulled out of Newcastle the social impact was enormous," Millan says.

"There was great stress placed on families and some broke down. There was an increase in violence in some families and there were suicides in severe cases. Those things do happen."

The picture is not a pretty one. When a person is fired from their job, not only is their financial security threatened, but there's also a disastrous effect on the person's self image and self esteem. Many within society judge people on the basis of their position or their earning power so even the

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Positive Workplace Foundation

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>> perceptions of others towards that person are altered.

Dr Sharp says first and foremost it's important that those who have lost their jobs learn from the experience to ensure it doesn't happen again. Whether or not it has anything to do with you personally, you must seek a clear and honest explanation for your dismissal and, if possible, use it to improve yourself for the next job.

"Face it honestly and openly," Dr Sharp says.

"Ask what you can learn from the situation. How can you improve? Do you have a clear idea of why you were fired? If not, go back and ask why. You need to listen to what they have to say and accept that you're not perfect. Then go away and work on whatever the problem was. Do you need to learn new skills? Do you need to improve your skills? Do you need to change some aspect of your interpersonal style? Whatever it is you need to understand it."

Donatus Michalka and Dr Peter Symons are Directors of the Positive Workplace Foundation. They agree that one must look into the reasons for their dismissal and work to solve these issues, then the situation takes on a more positive appearance.

"The good news is there are a lot of positive options," Michalka says.

"It is a question of mindset, attitude, taking stock and moving forward. Write down all of your positive traits and all of your life experiences, do an assessment of your personal assets and think what your strengths are. Ask yourself what is your passion. You've been offered a fresh

beginning, now what is it you want to do? Once you start to do that you get a massive mindshift."

"It's healthy to grieve," Dr Symons adds. "But once you've done that you must take a step forward, look at all of your opportunities and move on."

Bowler has personally helped over 2000 people find lifestyle and career success, and his organisation, Donington, has assisted countless more. He says a very important starting point is to figure out, as soon as you've been given the bad news, how to go home and tell your partner. It's also important to ensure you're surrounded by a reliable support network.

Rather than saying you've been sacked and feeling as though the sky is falling in, couch the dismissal in more positive terms – there was a restructure, your position was made redundant and now you're free to pursue other options. Putting a positive spin on the situation will put you, and those in your support network, in a position to creatively find a solution.

Don't assume you have to find another job immediately, Bowler says. Instead take the time to work out what you want to do, what sort of job would keep you interested and satisfied in the long term.

"We look at people's skills, values, motivators and their deep-seated interests, which they often overlook," Bowler says.

"An engineer who has lost their job might think they need to find another job as an engineer, but their deep-seated life interest is more to do with simply managing projects and managing people. We build a profile of them and look at career options and consider all >>

be prepared

It is possible for both the employer and the employee to prepare for, and even avoid, a dismissal by following a few professional guidelines.

>> Always be loyal to your position, but not necessarily your organisation, says Steve Bowler, Chairman of Australasian outplacement company, Donington. By this he means that these days very few organisations provide true job security, so whilst ensuring you're an excellent employee and exceptionally good at your job, always network within your industry and ensure there are other jobs up your sleeve.

>> Dr Peter Symons from the Positive Workplace Foundation says it's important for those within an organisation to do all they can to ensure the mental condition of those within a company remains healthy. Over one million Australians a year will suffer depression, he says, which is dangerous for the individual and destructive for those around them. Levels of stress and work/life balances within an organisation must be constantly reassessed in order to avoid loss of productivity.

>> "A lot of managers are often promoted on their technical ability and intellectual capacity, not on their people skills," says Dr Tim Sharp, from The Happiness Institute and who also runs Sharp & Co Executive Coaching. "Often something like a sacking is a big surprise because the manager hasn't adequately advised the person of the problems leading up to it. If the manager meets regularly with the person to discuss the issues and give clear guidance, allowing the person to improve, it is far more effective and less distressing for everyone."



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»possibilities. We ask what are the things they'd actually enjoy doing? Then we get down to the detailed techniques like a targeted résumé, interview techniques and how to network a hidden job market.”

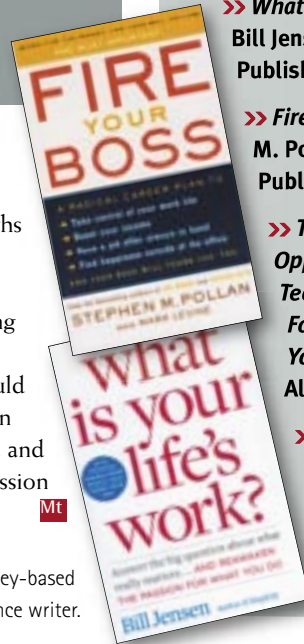
“The most important thing is to work out your passions,” Bowler says.

“When you work out your passions and look at your deep-seated life interests you often realise the job you've just lost was not satisfying you at all, that you've in fact been compromised for quite some time. When you lose that job there's no more compromising, it's time to look for a job that truly satisfies you.”

Michalka smiles when he recalls a conversation with an office worker who, several months earlier, had been emotionally shattered when he lost his job.

“He said, ‘If you told me being sacked was the best thing that would ever happen to me I would have thought you were crazy. In fact it forced me to re-evaluate, and now I've discovered my true passion is in olive farming.’”

Chris Sheedy is a Sydney-based freelance writer.



further reading

» *Surviving Redundancy by Someone Who Did: From Outrage to Opportunity*, Carolyn Jackson, John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd.

» *What Is Your Life's Work?*, Bill Jensen, HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

» *Fire Your Boss*, Stephen M. Pollan, HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

» *Turn Redundancy into Opportunity: Proven Techniques & Programmes For Taking Charge Of Your Own Future*, Laurel Alexander, How To Books.

» *But Why Me? Facing Up To And Coping With Redundancy*, David West, Choice Books.