

Helping Managers Deal with the Trauma of Dismissal: Implications for Intervention Theory and Practice

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Working citizens of industrialized nations are typically employees. Employment provides them with a livelihood, social status, and a functional role in society. Dismissal represents the ultimate in corporate punishment—banishment of the employee from the organization with little or no recourse to alter the sentence. It is no accident that colloquial references to dismissal bring forth images of execution, e.g. “getting axed,” “walking the plank,” etc. Despite whatever ambivalent feelings one might have about work, loss of employment due to firing can be a major life trauma because of the centrality of the concept of “employment” for financial as well as psychological well-being. Holmes and Rahe (1967) for example, conducted a study on the relative potency of social stresses which are correlated with physical and emotional disturbances. Of 43 social stresses listed, dismissal ranked as the eighth in significance, preceded only by death of a close family member, personal injury or illness, marital trouble, or jail sentencing.

Viktor E. Frankl’s concepts (1962, 1967, 1969) have been developed under far more severe conditions than those faced by dismissed executives. But incarceration in concentration camps, terminal illnesses, and dismissals are similar in

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that they require those undergoing the process to examine their attitude towards an unchangeable fate, while simultaneously coping with the reality of the present and the future. When working with executives and their families to help them plan a post-dismissal lifestyle, I unavoidably must deal with helping them to define and re-define their values and obligations.

Logotherapy is concerned with questions of value in its most fundamental sense. As Frankl states:

While the urgent questioning of the meaning of life is most apt to occur during adolescence, it may also come later, precipitated by some shaking experience. And, as the adolescent's preoccupation with this question is not a morbid symptom, so the spiritual distress, the existential crises of a mature man struggling to find a content for his life have nothing pathological about them (1973, pp. 28-29).

A central characteristic of Logotherapy is in helping patients discover their unique constellation of life values and personal sense of obligations to issues beyond immediate or long-term personal satisfaction.

While analytically-oriented psychotherapy focuses on "depth" in terms of bringing instinctual facts to consciousness, Logotherapy focuses on the "heights" in terms of helping to make conscious patients' spiritual and social responsibilities. In this sense, analytically-oriented psychotherapy and Logotherapy supplement each other. One important contradiction between the two, however, is that the analytically-oriented approach views philosophical speculations as defensive maneuvers which ought not to be accepted at face value. Logotherapy treats such issues as important in their own right.

As I will illustrate, Frankl's work is absolutely crucial in my clinical framework. But it has not been sufficient because of the lack of a transition perspective. Imbedded in Frankl's story of concentration camp experiences (1962) is the idea that there was an emotional transition process which inmates went through in order to adjust to their new situation. For example, he relates that many inmates initially had "depersonalized" reactions to incarceration—the reality situation appeared unreal or as if they were in a dream. A similar reaction appeared when the prisoners were initially liberated. An exploration of the meaning of the situation would not be terribly helpful under conditions when the inmate experiences that situation as unreal. But this transition period was often a temporary reaction; thus, the utility of a transition perspective in counseling which deals with people undergoing major life trauma.

A transition perspective is useful and important in my work with dismissed executives because it makes me aware that there may be some times when it is better to postpone important long-term career decisions because those decisions will be made while under the influence of relatively transitory emotional states. A stage of transition is also useful in helping executives feel more comfortable with their uncomfortable temporary emotional states:—they will, after all, only be temporary.

In 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published a landmark investigation regarding

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how patients with terminal illnesses adjust to impending death. She presented a framework which argued that there are well-defined emotional transitions which patients go through in order to reach a stage of healthy acceptance. My own work with dismissed managers yields similar conclusions; managers who make successful career adjustments appear to go through a modification of the stages outlined by Kubler-Ross.

In this article, I describe these stages as they relate to how I work with dismissed managers. By way of conclusion, I discuss the implications of the transition perspective for Logotherapy.

Transition Stages of Reaction to Dismissal

The transition stages of reaction to dismissal are labeled "It's Not Happening to Me," "Why Did This Happen to Me?" "If only . . .," "I'll Show Those SOBS!" "It's Over," and "Let's Get On With It."

It's Not Happening to Me

Few well-managed companies believe it is appropriate to completely surprise executives with the news of their dismissal. Prior to the formal notification, there may be several attempts to provide subtle and not-so-subtle hints. It is common for many emotionally healthy managers to intellectually understand what is being said while simultaneously blocking out the implications. For example:

Sam was an associate in a prestigious accounting firm with an "up-or-out" policy. A senior partner had made it clear to Sam that he would not be promoted to partnership status. Intellectually, he realized that the firm wanted to grant him an opportunity to find a new position before the official announcement was made regarding Sam's partnership status. Despite this, he continued to avoid making a job search. Sam was hoping against hope that his present assignment for an important client would change the partners' minds. Besides there was always too much work to do for the firm for him to begin a job search.

Even after formal dismissal notification has been given, it is common for some managers to emotionally block-out the implications of the news. For example:

Bill was vice-president of Manufacturing. He had been told by the president that there had been a revision in strategic plans and that the company wanted to undertake major changes in the existing production system. Under the circumstances, the company wanted to hire a "turn-around" manager from outside. The president stressed that the company would keep Bill on the payroll for four months while he conducted his job campaign. Every working day for the next three months, Bill showed up at the office and put in a full day's effort at company-related work. There always seemed to be so much to do . . . By the time Bill got around to being serious about searching for new employment, he realized he had squandered the precious time the company had given him.

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During this stage, managers often report feeling a sense of unreality about the entire situation. But they express supreme confidence about being able to quickly locate a new position. This sense of confidence is usually not based upon an analysis of the job market. The heart of the problem is an unwillingness to jump into the rigors of the job search, with its great potential for personal rejection.

A quick adjustment through this stage can be facilitated when the organization provides a clear and forceful indication that the individual's existing status with the existing social world has been changed. In concentration camps, this was accomplished through replacing inmates' accustomed social identity. They were stripped of personal names and called by numbers. Basic training in the U.S. military accomplishes this through shaving the heads of recruits upon arrival at boot camp.

In the context of corporate dismissal, I often recommend that corporate officials present fired executives with written severance agreements. These agreements contain final dates of employments. In addition, I help to insure that dismissed managers' existing work demands are appropriately scaled down and delegated to others. The company thus makes it clear that as long as dismissed executives are on the payroll, their primary job for the company is to find new and useful employment elsewhere.

Why Did This Happen to Me?

Anger is a major and typical aspect of the dismissal reaction cycle. Dismissed managers will point to less effective colleagues who are still employed by the company. They will blame their dismissal on political or personal factors outside their control. Sometimes these complaints are legitimate, and sometimes they are not.

During this phase, managers will often approach work associates and demand that they agree with them about the firm's unethical conduct. Such agreement does little in the way of helping dismissed managers move out of this stage and into healthier modes of action. The proper helpful response for work associates should not be to judge the company, but to reinforce dismissed executives' demonstrated personal and professional strengths. Managers' anger at the company or key corporate officials is often designed to protect them from feeling guilty and lacking in competence.

It is during this stage that it is often appropriate to explore with executives the meaning of "friendship" in their lives. Most of these individuals spend more time at work than they do at home, and come to consider work associates as a "second family." Colleagues' reactions to dismissed executives can sometimes be inadvertently cruel. For example, formerly close associates now avoid talking with them and may speak of them as if they were already dead.

The actual family, however, often draws close to executives following dismissal and offers them a source of solace and support. It is during this period that executives often come to appreciate that their "second family" was a mirage, and that they have neglected their responsibility to their primary family. The dismissal event sometimes serves to help executives make a re-commitment to the family and to allow family needs to shape the next career decision to a greater extent than it shaped the last one.

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If Only. . .

Once the initial anger wears off, many managers go through a phase in which they begin to clearly question their competence and they go through a period of self-recrimination. Schuyler G. Chapin, former General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, discussed his reaction to his own dismissal as follows:

. . . I felt my self-confidence slipping day-by-day. I would awaken in the middle of the night, certain that if I had made such-and-such a move at such-and-such a time, this would never have happened. I kept reliving the crises. I knew there were administrative problems that I had not solved, plans that were taking longer to carry out than I had hoped, decisions I had made that were wrong. All these points haunted me, and gradually I began to believe that I was a total failure and almost deserved to be let go. I became increasingly certain that I had brought the whole thing on myself. I was a failure. . . (1980, p. 27).

The key issue here is guilt over real and imagined inadequacy. It is a particularly difficult stage because to dwell excessively on the past can easily drain managers of self-confidence and thus damage the likelihood of finding good jobs. On the other hand, refusal to dwell on the past robs managers of the opportunity to learn about real weaknesses. Managers' failure to learn from the experience increases the likelihood of repeating past mistakes in new jobs that are found. During this phase, my major role is to assist managers in helping them to separate what is real from what is not through reviewing events surrounding the dismissal, talking to former superiors and work associates, and assessing managerial strengths through a test battery.

I'll Show Those SOBs!

During this transition stage, managers become convinced that they were treated unfairly. There is a strong desire to want to seek revenge. Revenge in this sense is usually defined as becoming a tremendous success in those very areas where former employers stated they would never be successful. The advantage of this stage is that it provides a potent psychological incentive to conduct an aggressive job campaign. The chief disadvantage is that, if carried to extremes, the focus of the job search can shift from finding a position which would best fit the manager's capabilities. It now shifts to finding a position which would prove to the former employer that he/she was wrong. For example:

Felix was a 32 year old comptroller for a commercial bank. In his reports and personal dealings with bank officers, he would try to develop concrete suggestions to correct problems uncovered by his audits. He thought he was demonstrating initiative through these actions, but was only managing to generate hostility. Some senior managers resented an inexperienced accountant telling them how to improve their operations. The President was concerned that Felix's strong advocacy stance would make it difficult for him to retain his role as auditor. Over time, Felix lost his creditability and was fired.

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In dismissing him, the President urged him to seek a management role in an accounting function. It seemed to the President that he would be happier and would have less role conflict in a position where he could implement some of the plans he liked to recommend to others.

Felix was determined to find another position as bank auditor. There are banks in this country," he said, "who appreciate a bright and innovative auditor. I'll show (the President)!" Felix eventually found the position he was seeking at a small rural bank. Its president had initially thought that the bank could use someone aggressive like Felix. But this bank, too, eventually found Felix too abrasive to perform a staff job properly. He was eventually fired from that bank as well.

One of the problems of this phase is that many managers think they are basing their career decision upon an objective analysis, but outside observers can easily see how important revenge is as a motive for the career selections. At this stage I question the motives behind the career choices. Through counselling, some managers can be prevented from too quickly finding new positions where old dysfunctional conflicts emerge again.

While the desire for revenge is an obvious defense mechanism, this doesn't necessarily mean that it is an inappropriate one. As I mentioned earlier, the desire for revenge can be a potent incentive to conduct a vigorous job campaign under circumstances when executives might ordinarily withdraw into depression. For example:

After working twelve years as Plant Facilities Manager for a major corporation, Joe was fired. There was an initial period of self-doubt and overt hostility. Following this transition, Joe decided that he would some day return to the company in a higher level position and eventually fire the person who fired him. He conducted an aggressive and forceful job campaign and eventually succeeded in securing a new position which put him in a higher status job. Once he secured this new position, he renounced his former desire to return to the old organization and stated that if his former boss was as poor a manager as he knew him to be, the boss would eventually get fired by someone else.

During this transition period, executives frequently decide on the type of organizations they wish to commit themselves to. The initial reaction is to seek a mirror image of the previous organization. For example, if the previous organization was large, they are likely to want to seek a smaller firm where they have a greater sense of impact on corporate end-results; if the previous organization had inefficient or sloppy management systems, they are likely to want to seek an organization with a good reputation for managerial excellence.

It's Over

This transition period is the one commonly associated with depression. Executives relive the happy memories of work achievements and satisfied interactions with co-workers with the realization that "it's over." Loss of appetite

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and interest in sex are common during this period. An understanding family support system is highly important during this phase, and I frequently work with spouses in terms of helping them to help their husbands/wives through grief.

My interventions during this phase tend to focus on helping executives and their families view this depression as a necessary phase and a badge of honor. People tend to develop only a few major life commitments. Such commitments are not easily made and often take time to develop. If that assertion is reasonable, then it is also reasonable to assume that the process of de-commitment is not easily accomplished. It takes time. And it will be painful. Expressions of grief are an indication of how seriously executives were committed to the goals of the organization and their place in the company. Those managers who report little grief were probably never really committed to the organization in the first place. *Let's Get On with It.*

At this stage, executives typically accept the dismissal decision as final and seek to develop a mature analysis of the events leading up to the dismissal. This analysis takes into account the employers' role as well as their contributions to their own dismissal. The time for recrimination, however, is over. The executive is seeking to learn from the event. For example:

As a child, Harry was sickly and grew up to become a reserved and cautious individual. A position as an accountant fitted well with his life style.

Professionally, Harry advanced through the financial function to become Vice-President of Finance for ABC, Inc., a small chain of retail stores. During his late 30's, a doctor diagnosed Harry as suffering from an allergic reaction to certain types of protein. This allergy had contributed to his chronic illnesses. Through a special diet, Harry was able to prevent these allergic reactions from bothering him again. At the same time, he undertook a strenuous regimen of exercise. He also successfully completed an MBA program in the evenings.

In the tenth year of employment with ABC, he had a violent disagreement with the President over the appropriateness of a new venture dear to the heart of the President. The venture was undertaken despite these reservations, and relations between the two men began to deteriorate. A year later, Harry was fired on the grounds that the President wanted to re-organize the company and needed "fresh perspective."

Harry's reaction tended to focus on his anger towards the President for punishing him for expressing his opinions. His body would become visibly tense when he talked about the man. Harry wanted to have nothing to do with small businesses or even the retail industry and organized his job search in that direction.

Over time and with counseling, he came to see the positive meaning of the firing in his life. His assertive disagreement with the President's venture had represented another manifestation of his having turned away from the meek person Harry had been as a child and young adult. Being outspoken in the corporate world, however, is sometimes not without its

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negative consequences, and Harry was suffering through one of those consequences. He eventually came to view the firing as a badge of courage which he readily displayed to prospective employers. He wanted to let them know the kind of person they were dealing with when they spoke with Harry!

Implications for Logotherapy

In this paper, I have tried to convey my framework for working with dismissed executives in helping them to make a successful transition to new organizational roles. My work is clearly a form of psychotherapy in the sense that it involves a helping relationship which focuses on emotional reactions to life situations. There is, however, an important systems orientation to this therapy in that I work with the dismissal corporation along with family members of the displaced executives to involve them in the helping process.

Of the different schools of psychotherapy, I tend to associate myself most closely with Logotherapy. As I have tried to illustrate in my discussion of the transition sequences in reactions to dismissal, each stage poses slightly different challenges of meaning for executives as they seek to come to grips with their unchanging fate. Thus, one stage raises issues of friendship and the role of the family in executives' lives, another stage focuses on mourning the loss of organizational affiliations or roles they have been committed to, a third stage helps them to define the new organizations they can commit themselves to, and the final stage helps the executives integrate the meaning of the dismissal event in the context of their life values.

There have been few attempts within the school of Logotherapy, however, to examine reactions to major loss using an explicit transition framework, and I have attempted to do this by introducing a modification of such a framework as presented by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Of course, not all managers go through the transition sequence in the order that I have presented. Some go through combinations of sequences. But all the managers I have worked with who have made successful career transitions have gone through each of the phases at one time or another.

The explanation for why it is appropriate to view reactions to major loss from a transition perspective can probably be explained from a psychodynamic framework in the sense that at various points during the reaction sequence different defense mechanisms go into operation. Denial, for example, may be in operation during "It's Not Happening to Me." But rather than analyze this defense mechanism, my approach with healthy executives is to seek to blast it away through using corporate dismissal procedure as a lever. There is probably more than a hint of projection as a defense mechanism in "I'll Show Those SOBs!", but I will only analyze it if I believe it to be dysfunctional. At times I even encourage it, for it can serve a useful purpose for the executive.

But the goal of my psychotherapy with dismissed executives is not psychoanalytic in the sense of focusing on defense mechanisms per se. That is why I have labeled my transition stages colloquially instead of psychoanalytically. The colloquial expressions have more meaning for my dismissed executives.

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In the final analysis, the focus of my intervention is to help executives find new meaning in terms of finding new values in relation to their families, to their organizations, to their professions, and to themselves. Although speaking in another context, Dr. Frankl (1973) has aptly described the opportunity offered by Logotherapy: to find one's place and fill it—and thereby fulfill oneself.

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