

Careers

I Am My Biggest Project

New Horizons For Executives

Chapter 4 | Crises and Setbacks

By
Maria DA GLÓRIA RIBEIRO



Amrop

Leaders For What's Next

Crises and setbacks

A career is just one part of our life, one of its many roles. Whether through our own experience or by being exposed to the experiences of others, whether we take a romantic view of life or we don't, we know that life is rarely a freeway without bends, bumps, or obstacles. On the contrary, it's a winding and complicated road. The important thing is the resilience that gives us the courage to fight adversity — and to continue our journey.

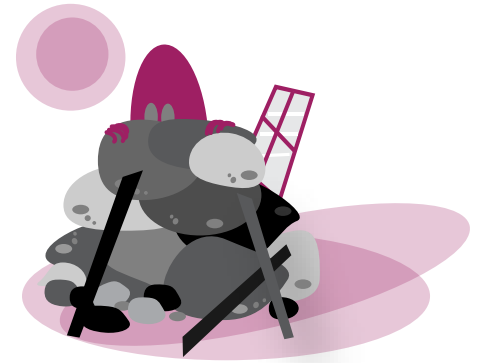
Resilience is the ability to resist, endure, keep our persistence levels topped up, without giving up or falling apart. Resilience requires an elevated resistance to frustration, and a spirit of self-sacrifice. Resilience also pre-supposes a vision for the future, a sense of mission. Resilient people believe it's worthwhile engaging and living in the here and now, whilst having the stoicism to achieve less immediate outcomes.

By their very nature, obstacles are difficult to overcome. But overcoming obstacles is the only way to move ahead on our path and fulfil our life's goals.

During our careers, there are also moments of discontinuity. All of a sudden, we are disoriented, lost in our own lives. Global, sectoral, or other crises closer to home knock us off course and damage our self-esteem. Without warning, the worst happens. We find ourselves in a situation in which we have unsolicited time on our hands. In our own eyes at least, we're unemployable, unable to meet our own needs, let alone the needs of the people who depend on us. When suddenly we fall out of frame, unemployed or bankrupt, our world collapses. All our landmarks disappear. Our existence is totally de-structured. As in any major crisis of life, bereavement, divorce or other, the ground beneath our feet seems to vanish into thin air.

The most important thing is not to allow ourselves to be destroyed. Not to lose our self-esteem.

As always in difficult moments our entourage wishes us strength and courage — qualities we have to dig deep to find. More, we must be able to rediscover and reinvent ourselves - to believe that we are capable of far more than what we have been able to do so far.



Restructuring and restarting

Many executives have shared positive experiences with me - people who seemed to have lost everything, including their self-esteem, and were able to reorganize and regroup. "Rebirth out of the ashes" is a reality - one that is possible and within all our reach. It demands freeing ourselves from the superfluous and focus on the essential, on what we truly are, and on re-building our self-esteem.

In this way, step by step, with tenacity, determination, (and a healthy dose of humility), we will be able to pursue the challenging path of personal or professional restructuring — even if this involves repositioning ourselves, readjusting to a totally different reality and changing our concept of what self-realization means for us.

Alfonso worked for a highly-respected multinational company

He was recruited into a management position, and everything went well from the outset. After three years he moved into a leadership role, replacing his boss (who had requested early retirement). During the following four years, Alfonso evolved professionally, reaping good financial and other benefits. He was a trendsetter in his domain, happy and fulfilled.

And then came a moment of drastic change at corporate headquarters: a merger and strategic restructuring which played out at Alfonso's divisional level. Following a centralized decision, the executive committees of each subsidiary were analyzed and reviewed with the aim of creating a new company adapted to the new shareholder- and strategic framework.

Alfonso was not amongst the executives selected to remain in the new organization. He enjoyed a good reputation, but when it came to the knowledge the new subsidiary needed, he did not match up to the executives that had been brought in by the merger. He received his compensation package and left, hoping to be able to resume his career in a different organization.

But nine months later, he had still achieved nothing. His sector had developed out of all recognition. Any positions comparable to his previous post were either already occupied, or their profiles beyond Alfonso's reach. However, he reacted positively and managed to find another solution for his life: using his redundancy payout to become a franchisee in the retail division of his previous business.

Today, Alfonso has a good life. For sure, he misses the information sharing and the sense of always being on top of the news — facets of his former role in the multinational. On the other hand, he likes having total control over his actions, feeling the reins of the business in his hands. He travels less these days, but this gives him more time to work on his golf handicap.

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Subversive reactions, going on literal or metaphorical strike, disengaging, a general lack of commitment – these are exactly the behaviors most likely to harm our image in the eyes of critical decision-makers, blocking the very progression we're looking for. Should there be any hesitation surrounding our promotion, we justify it.

Promotion, stagnation and demotion

If all goes well, professional growth, a heightened capacity to perform and deliver, will put us in line for promotion. As a rule, (as long as we're not promoted beyond our ability), a promotion is a smooth and joyful transition. The important thing is to keep our integrity intact, maintaining a degree of humility, so that the people around us accept us in our new, more responsible role.

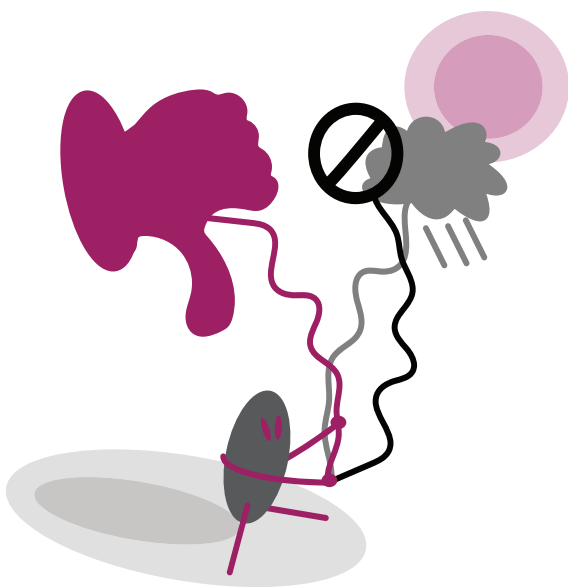
However, as professional life goes on, we may also feel that we really should have evolved more by now, and that this just isn't happening. And why could that be?

Subversive reactions, going on literal or metaphorical strike, checking out, a general lack of commitment – these are exactly the behaviors most likely to harm our image in the eyes of critical decision-makers, blocking the very progression we're looking for. Should there be any hesitation surrounding our promotion, we justify it.

What I advise is to resist the temptation to 'check out', instead maintaining our all-important resilience, cultivating the conditions for that promotion moment and maximizing the chances of it happening. Even when it is assumed that there will be no place for us in a particular group, we should still be the best possible version of ourselves, and leave a positive mark.

Demotion is something else. If we are the member of a group that is demoted due to some particular event, whether related to the economy, competitive market forces or other factors, we must decide what to do as a group, maintaining the body to which we belong.

Suffering an individual demotion is something else again. Even if this is a 'relegation' that we have to admit is fair and comes at the right time, one that gives us the opportunity to better prepare ourselves and then move forward into the future, (and let's face it, this is rarely the case), we must still try to develop. Or change, even if this means that we have to restructure ourselves.



Claudia was a high-performing Marketing Manager in a leading consumer company. She led a team of Product Managers and consistently achieved her KPIs. Then globalization wrought massive change in Claudia's organization, as is so often the case. Several divisions of three European structures were merged, eliminating a number of functions. Claudia hoped to be invited to continue her work in London, the base for Western Europe.

The invitation arrived, but the setting was different. Claudia's new position was to be one level below her previous one: a regional product management role in which she would lose the team management aspect of her job and be absorbed into a broader group of shared responsibility and limited autonomy.

Claudia hesitated for a long time before making her decision, but ultimately decided to accept. If, on one hand, she no longer manages a team and has limited autonomy, on the other, her work has acquired a broader dimension. The opportunity to be part of an international group has been a fascinating experience. It has been rewarding to learn new realities, understand different cultures and deal with a bigger volume of business. However, the main change has been becoming a subordinate again and no longer being part of the decision-making forum. Instead of listening to the opinions of others and having the power to decide, Claudia now gives her opinion and waits for other people's decisions. However, she has gained so much life experience that she still feels the demotion was worth accepting.



What can we learn from this case? Look forward to the new opportunity, even though you know it will not be easy! Claudia is one of a group of twenty people who have adapted as she has, and are now back in line for promotion. In the meantime, I urge you to learn as much as possible, and get ready to evolve.

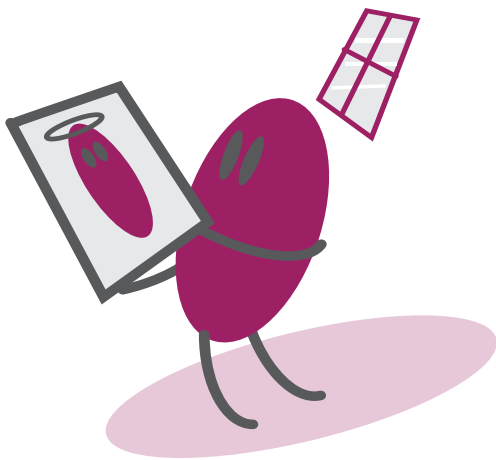
Being fit for What's Next

The coaches of distinguished sportspeople in arenas such as tennis, golf or athletics talk about the great results their trainees can achieve from their interventions: self-confidence, abilities that differentiate them from the pack, increased effort and performance capacity, perseverance.

They remind us how they detected specific skills in their trainees and were able to empower them. It is this theoretical example that must be used when we have to re-start our career — and therefore an important part of our lives.

Doing this is a matter of self-knowledge and wisdom. We must gain the best possible understanding of how well our knowledge and track record really serve the field of employment that we have in our sights. We must be able to recognize in ourselves the distinct skills we can present to our next organization. For example, if we know that multiculturalism is important for a given leadership function, we need to display clear evidence of that when we present ourselves – similarly, when it comes to analytical reasoning or creative and disruptive ability. And so on. You can find more about this in my previous article – Personal Marketing.

And yet, thinking about the executives I meet every day, I have no doubt that the majority possess profile characteristics whose potential they have not yet fully leveraged.



I remember Joana. She studied civil engineering because, as a very good student in all disciplines, she felt compelled to choose a difficult and differentiating course.

Meanwhile she began to develop her career by undertaking post-graduate studies at the Instituto Superior Técnico, working in an important project office. But she did not feel fulfilled. There was something missing in her life. Since she had always been interested in literature, and poetry in particular, she decided to join a cultural group. And this was the starter gun for a big change.

Although Joana continued her profession as a design engineer, she started, little by little, to write. First, as a poet, she began to be referenced in publications, and made plans to publish and expand her writing beyond her blog. At a specific moment, she decided to leave her engineering post and went to work at a publishing house. Her writing was gaining ground and eventually she was invited to be a columnist in a highly-reputed publication.

After re-structuring and starting over, Joana discovered what she is passionate about and today feels fully fulfilled.

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Never say never

So a 'rupture situation' is a time to regroup and think about how to get back in the saddle. To be aware that the future will be different from the past, as society is advancing ever faster. We must free ourselves from old dogmas and be able to reinvent ourselves.

As I've shared here and in previous articles, each of us has characteristics that we can improve and develop. At the most formal level, it can mean exposing ourselves to complementary training, post-graduate education and other forms of learning. The important thing is the capacity to rediscover ourselves through self-knowledge and restructure when circumstances demand it.

We all have something that sets us apart, that we can put at the service of other people. Detecting it takes lucid self-analysis, identifying what, on our profile, is worth exploring, and then restructuring, rebuilding or reinforcing it with the new (or underlying) competencies we have discovered in ourselves.

The easiest and most direct example is that of someone who wants to evolve in a leadership position but who trained in technology or science.

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This was the case with Dinis, with whom I worked. From a high school love of biology he opted for a degree in the subject. He then took up a clinical research role in a pharmaceutical company. He liked the company and wanted to evolve. However he realized that he lacked the managerial knowledge he needed to stand out from his peers.

So he decided to invest in a prestigious MBA. Of course, it is not easy to reconcile professional and family life with the pace and effort required by an MBA, but it was worth it. Dinis gained the skills he needed to redesign his profile. He was immediately accepted into an evaluation process that gave him the possibility of evolving to a position of outstanding decision-making. Furthermore, a company from a similar sector made Dinis a job offer. Dinis was however leaning in another direction. He chose to start again. He accepted an offer at a strategic consulting firm specializing in the sciences. Of course he had to learn a new job, but that was what he wanted. Today, he is a Partner in the firm, and professionally fulfilled.

Time to decide

Making a decision is difficult — it means simultaneously having to choose one preference and reject another one. Often we can't summon up the courage. It's so much easier to remain in limbo and allow other people or the passage of time to decide for us. Deliberating, determining, resolving... these all take bravery. They also require the ability risk making a mistake.

The dread of facing the error resulting from a poor decision bubbles up with greater or lesser intensity. No wonder we so often give in to the temptation of simply not deciding. It's easier to just let things happen. Especially in the world of professional decisions. I must confess that the more we are aware of our actions, the harder it is to decide.

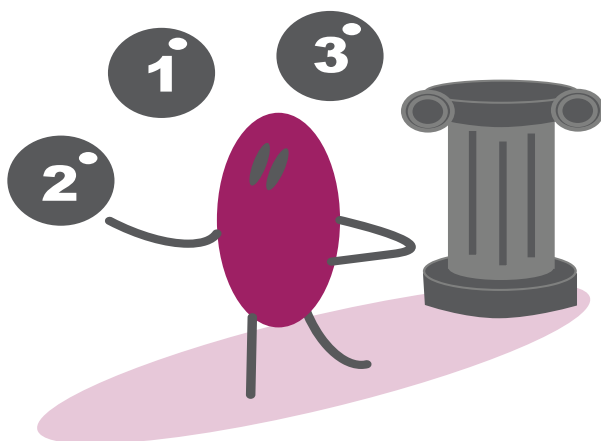
Of course, a total, crippling inability to make decisions can signal an underlying mental health problem. However we're talking here about people who are mentally healthy, with normal social interactions.

In my professional experience the greater a person's capacity for social integration, the more likely they will be able to make individual, authentic, and conscientious decisions. The essential thing is to think for ourselves, to be ourselves and to respect our individuality, even if we cannot disregard the circumstances surrounding us.

Preparing ourselves to be able to decide means learning to face the insecurity of the unknown. Being able to take the risk of choosing.

How is this capacity acquired or developed? In an Amrop global study: 'Stepping Up to Wise Decision-Making' we set out some procedures that can help maximize the chances of a sustainable decision (and indeed, help us face the intimidating gap of the unknown). Following, we give a recap.

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1

Using our rear view mirror

Managerial wisdom can be defined as: *expertise in creating meaning and appropriate conduct in business life*. It improves our ability to face the future in a way that is not only more profitable, but also more sustainable. Leaders who examine and reflect on their past experience can create opportunities to strengthen their core capabilities whilst acknowledging their limitations and potential biases. These insights from the past (via experience) and being more mindful (about experiencing) are important resources for taking a broader perspective — and can lead to wiser decisions.

However, our study found that leaders are missing a big opportunity — perhaps you may be one of them! Only around one in ten really make a habit of drawing on their experience in that they 'dedicate themselves to remembering past events', or 'recall the past to see if they have changed since then'. Yet looking back is clearly helping leaders deal with the here and now. Four out of ten who do this say that insights from their past can be an important source of knowledge today.

2

Managing our bias

We all develop unconscious routines or 'heuristics' to cope with complexity, especially when we lack data. Whilst these 'rules of thumb,' may be useful, they are not foolproof. In 'Outsmart Your Own Bias' Soll, Milkman and Payne, (Harvard Business Review, 2015), give invaluable guidance on checks and balances that will help you to 'engineer' a decision likely to play out well. We asked leaders how regularly they apply these. Again, we find some missed opportunities. For example, under half generally or always think about what they'll miss if they make a certain choice, imagine the advice they would give someone else if they were not involved, conduct a pre-mortem (imagining the reasons their decision could fail) or imagine that none of the options they have in mind are possible and ask: '*what else could I do?*'

Of these, possibly the most important is to work through several scenarios to help discern the outcome of a hypothetical decision. It helps to write down a list of likely consequences resulting from the possible paths you have in mind. You will then be able to see more clearly the results of several decision hypotheses and place the most value on what best fits your objectives

3

Involving stakeholders

In the turbulent pressure of life (and business life) it is for each of us to decide how high we set the consultation bar in the challenging process of decision-making. Consciously reflecting on the complexity of the decision and the stakes involved can help us set the process, reduce risk and heighten sustainability. This implies drawing on experience, as above. We asked leaders about a range of ways to involve stakeholders, and again, found several opportunities missed. For example, only around a third systematically select the people they involve on the basis of knowledge or competencies, or interview selected top executives one-on-one. And only a quarter involve different stakeholder groups. Under one in ten voluntarily involve 'difficult' people — who will likely raise blocking or delaying questions. And yet it is these 'devil's advocates' who can be the most invaluable.



The art of self-forgiveness

Despite all our best efforts, we may not be able to avoid error, since decisions often involve so many stimuli and circumstances outside our control that we may no longer fully dominate any final outcome.

Yet dealing with error is also an act of learning. And we must know how to find within ourselves the self-esteem that allows us to accept a mistake we have made, without it destroying us.

With resilience, being generous toward ourselves, we can begin to accept ourselves after making a mistake, without feeling sorry for ourselves, or beating ourselves up.

I leave with a reflection on the sensation of bitterness, nostalgia and pure emptiness that we may experience when we abdicate our power to make a decision. This is on a poetic note, therefore, an emotional one, but it can help us to think about the consequences of not deciding.

Do not believe, Lidia,
That no-one we have lost
Can come back
To strike down the flower we delayed harvesting.

Each day is given to you only once
And in the round circle of the night
There is no mercy
For the one who hesitates.

Later it will be late, and it is late.
Time erases everything but this
Long indelible track
Left behind by the un-lived..

Do not believe in the delay in which you measure yourself.
Kronos never stops, he whose step
Always goes before
Your own step

'Homage to Ricardo Reis'
By Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen
Dual, 1972

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Credits

This article series is adapted from the original book, 'Eu Sou o Meu Maior Projecto', (Maria da Glória Ribeiro, Manuscrito Editora, 2016)
Additional input provided by Steffi Gande, Global Marketing Director, Amrop.

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