Career Derailment:

Burnout and Bullying at the Executive Level

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Abstract

Executive derailment refers to unexpected and unwanted changes in the trajectory of an executive career caused either by factors within the person or by organisational factors external to the person, or a combination of both, leading to loss of identity. This phenomenological study explored subjective experiences of four high functioning professionals who had experienced executive derailment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results showed four superordinate themes that encapsulated a trajectory from severe loss of identity, integrity, and livelihood, to newly defined authenticity following derailment: (1) Self-doubt and blame; (2) targeted bullying; (3) psychological vulnerability and distress; and (4) Meaning-making and personal growth. The first three themes highlight varying levels of psychological distress and burnout and the vicarious impact on family life. The fourth theme involved a redefined self-integrity where forgiveness and psychological recovery could emerge and allow for a reconsideration of career pathways. The recognition that personal and professional growth can arise following executive derailment is a novel finding with important implications for coaches. A positive psychological and growth-oriented mindset may be helpful in harnessing change with executives following derailment.

Key words: Derailment, burnout, bullying, psychological distress, growth.
Introduction

Executive derailment, or the demise of an executive career, is involuntary demotion or being made redundant below the level of anticipated achievement (Lombardo, Ruderman & McCauley, 1988). Executive derailment can occur from factors internal or external to the person. Internal factors can affect an individual’s ability to self-reflect creating blind spots in relation to leadership and sensitivity to others (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004). External factors include organisational restructuring particularly in times of economic decline, or workplace bullying (Gray, Gabriel, & Goregaokar, 2015; Kellerman, 2004; Lombardo, Ruderman & McCauley, 1988). However, there is a paucity of research into external factors. Therefore, this study explored the subjective interpretations of high functioning professionals who had been derailed by external factors. It sought both positive and negative subjective interpretations of experiencing organisational restructuring and/or executive level bullying.

High functioning executives have been shown to differ significantly from the general population in attributes of empathy, self-regard, reality testing and problem solving (Stein, Papadogiannis, Yip, & Sitarenios, 2009). Furthermore, they tend to exhibit emotional, social and cognitive competencies across a variety of settings and cultures (Ryan, Emmerling & Spencer 2009) which predict the ease at which they manage tasks and people, provide training, and retain employees (Ryan, Emmerling & Spencer 2009; Stein, Papadogiannis, Yip, & Sitarenios, 2009). As a consequence, derailment of high functioning individuals can have costly effects on working relationships, productivity, financial outcomes, and organisational functioning (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Lombardo & McCauley, 1988). Additionally, the cost of derailment to the individual is also high including a catastrophic loss of identity often impacting on family life, income, and psychological wellbeing (McCall, 2003). Thirty to fifty per cent of high functioning managers are estimated to derail at some time in their career (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1995).
Career executives are most commonly midlife (ages 38-50), a critical time in which self-reflection and an evaluation of former dreams and current achievements often occurs (Webb, 2006). However, for some executives, grandiosity, or feelings of superiority, can inhibit self-reflection creating blind spots in their leadership style and sensitivity to others (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004). Without awareness, derailment can occur. For others, derailment can occur following organisational restructuring, poor or inaccurate feedback, overly demanding timelines and workloads, or through work-place bullying (Gray et al., 2015; Kellerman, 2004). At the very top of the executive chain, corporate psychopathy resulting in abusive and bullying behaviours to second level managers has led to long periods of stress leave, high turnover, negative organisational outcomes, and derailment (McCleskey, 2013).

Three dynamics of derailment have been identified. Two are regarded as integral interpersonal flaws in the individual, for example, 1) a strength becomes a weakness (such as technical expertise becoming less important than team building skills); or, 2) the individual exhibits negative personality traits (such as a lack of interpersonal sensitivity) or is psychologically unwell. A third less researched cause of executive derailment relates to factors external to the individual including organisational changes (Lombardo, Ruderman & McCauley, 1988) and within-company bullying (Gray, Gabriel, & Goregaokar, 2015).

However, little is known of how individuals make sense of executive derailment that is not of their own making (Gentry & Shanock, 2008).

Workplace bullying is a behaviour used by one person to control another and involves “repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers, that creates a risk to health and safety” (Work Safe Australia, 2011, p. 4). Bullying can manifest in direct or indirect forms. Direct forms include offensive behaviour and spreading misinformation or malicious rumours. Indirect forms can include “unreasonably overloading
a person with work, constantly changing deadlines, deliberately excluding a person from normal work activities, withholding vital information, or deliberately changing work arrangements, such as rosters and leave, to inconvenience a particular worker or workers” (Work Safe Australia, p.4). In 2011, the Australian Productivity Commission estimated the national annual cost of productivity losses associated with workplace bullying to be between $6 and $36 billion (Guilliatt, 2011). Burnout is often a consequence of bullying as the targeted individual strives to respond to criticism, self-doubt and confusion.

Executive or managerial burnout is “a state of depletion of a person’s resources and energy, resulting in apathy and inexpressive behaviour towards others, having dysfunctional repercussions on the individual and adverse effects on organizations” (Sharma, 2007, p. 23). The effects of burnout can be physical, behavioural and psychological. Physical symptoms may include emotional exhaustion, psychological symptoms may include depersonalisation or perceived lack of personal accomplishment, while behavioural signs may include withdrawal, resentment, disenchantment, discouragement, boredom or confusion (Freudenberger, 1981). Lack of performance feedback, heavy workload, time pressure, conflicts surrounding roles in the workplace, low social support and a lack of independence were identified as factors related to burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

Psychologically, a burnt-out executive may have difficulties with emotional regulation, and the slightest trigger may initiate feelings of anger, or a suspicious attitude involving paranoia. Continued dissatisfaction with the work situation may lead to depersonalisation, depression or physical ailments. Rigidity may also emerge as a serious personality manifestation, where the person may become closed to any input, and thinking may become inflexible (Freudenberger, 1981).

The wellbeing of high functioning executives and professionals is closely linked to burnout and career derailment. Some individuals who feel that they have been unjustly
harmed by an employer may develop mental health problems (McCormack & Joseph, 2013). Furthermore, profound despair has been reported by executives derailed and unemployed in their 50’s (Gabriel, Gray & Goregoakar, 2010), while major depression has been found in up to twelve percent of former Danish managers after they discontinued work (Bech, Andersen, Bech-Andersen, Tonnesen et al., 2005). Role overload and lack of social support are predictors of major depression in managers (Bech et al.) and, as previously discussed, were identified as factors related to burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). As yet, little is known of the effects of derailment on family and relationship breakdown, long term unemployment or suicide.

However, though stressful and traumatic events can have severe and chronic effects on a person’s psychological functioning, there is also evidence that positive psychological growth can result from challenging and adverse events, commonly referred to as posttraumatic growth (Joseph, 2011). Such growth can be viewed as the process of trying to make sense of this highly challenging period, which has shattered previous goals, beliefs and expectations. Growth may also involve personality development and unpacking of values to accommodate new facts and experiences, in turn modifying a person’s worldviews and life-direction. Although this literature has developed in relation to traumatic events, it might be that similar experiences of personal growth can arise from experiences of executive derailment which also shatter previous goals, beliefs and expectations.

A few studies have explored how individuals make sense of events in the workplace that have resulted in major and sometimes traumatising changes to life-direction. Executive nurses, for instance, were able to turn job loss into successful career transitions (Carroll, DeVincinti & Show, 1995). Webb (2006) found that with the assistance of an executive coach, a derailed executive in the legal profession was able to identify his cognitive blind spots and detrimental behavioural patterns through awareness of his personality structure.
Self-awareness has been identified as a key factor for avoiding and preventing burnout and career derailment (Gentry & Shanock, 2008). It aligns well with psychological flexibility, described as a fluid construct in the real world and important for psychologically healthy transaction between leaders, their staff and the work environment (Kashdan & Rotterburg, 2010). Executives and leaders with psychological flexibility: (1) adapt to fluctuating situational demands, (2) reconfigure mental resources, (3) shift perspective, and (4) balance competing desires, needs, and life domains (Kashdan & Rotterburg, 2010). High achievers who are psychologically inflexible, lack awareness of their weaknesses and strengths, or are unable to adapt to changes in their job environment, may be at risk of potential derailment.

Although there is a great deal of research exploring characteristics of leadership (see Hogan, Hogan & Kaiser, 2009), and some research reporting on executives who have recovered from a career derailment (see Kovach, 2001), there is a paucity of rich qualitative research into the ‘lived’ experience of career derailment distress in the context of organisational change and bullying in high functioning professionals, and its impact on psychological wellbeing. In addition, there is a lack of individual subjective interpretation of the experience of career derailment as a product of organisational changes and workplace bullying.

This qualitative study seeks to explore the ‘lived’ experience of being derailed at the executive and professional level from external factors such as organisational restructuring and/or executive level bullying. It is interested in both positive and negative subjective interpretations of high functioning professionals particularly the impact on psychological wellbeing. It is hoped that findings from this study will inform organisations, professionals, therapists and coaches regarding the impact, prevention, and management of career derailment and executive burnout.
Method

Participants

Following university ethical approval from the Committee for Ethics in Human Research, the participants of the study were sourced through email correspondence with organisations and ‘think tanks’. It sought executives or professionals who met the selection criteria, i.e. senior professionals who had experienced the phenomenon of derailment through external factors. Four participants (one female and three male) aged between 47 and 64 participated in the study. They were all past or current senior-ranking high achievers who had experienced psychological distress following interruption to a successful and high functioning career through negative organisational changes and/or bullying.

Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality. The first participant (Diana) was in a leadership position and on track to become a General Manager, however, after an organisational merger, she described that she was micromanaged and bullied by an externally instated General Manager. The second participant (Chris) was a retired emergency services senior manager who reported that he experienced negative organisational changes which resulted in a significant increase of his workload. He reported that he was subjected to bullying through false accusations and experienced subsequent ‘executive burnout’. The third participant (Les) was a consultant physician who explained that he was targeted and threatened with medical incompetence by an area health authority executive. He described these threats as harassment and bullying over an extended period of time. The fourth participant (Liam) was a senior manager who experienced organisational changes that resulted in forced redundancy. All four participants were high achievers who reported having worked successfully at senior levels for many years until the identified incidents. All reported that they experienced psychological distress for which they were either unprepared
or lacked the resources to overcome. As a result of their distress, they all sought help from psychological or medical professionals.

Analytic strategy

Unlike Grounded Theory or Discourse Analysis, interpretative phenomenological paradigms such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) have a critical realism perspective of the world focusing on how individuals socially construct and interpret their world (Blaikie, 2000). As such IPA is closely aligned with the social view of symbolic interactionism which accepts that: 1) people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; 2) these meanings are derived from social interaction; and, 3) meaning is modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1995). Therefore, IPA as an idiographic method (Smith & Osborn, 2008) allows researchers to unfold the idiosyncratic nature of each participant’s narrative and meaning making of a specific phenomenon from their socially constructed world allowing both diverse and converse themes to emerge. Similarly, due to its iterative investigative style, IPA is recommended for investigating previously unexplored topics where subjective meanings, values and beliefs are important but poorly understood (Smith, 1996). At all times the researcher strives to stay within the interpreted world of the participant using a ‘double hermeneutic’ to reflect and clarify the participant making meaning of his/her experience (Smith, 1996).

Procedure

A semi-structured interview using a funnelling technique was developed according to the protocols of IPA (see Tables 1 & 2; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This allowed the phenomenon under investigation to be explored from general to specific interpretations. Target questions were used to prompt responses in an attempt to understand the subjective ‘lived’ experiences of executive derailment. The questions aimed to capture both positive and negative interpreted meaning of experiences. Participants were informed of the study’s
aims and that they could withdraw at any time and request their interviews be destroyed.

Prior to the interviews, the participants were given a summary of the research aims.

Following consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the University Health Clinic, via telephone or over Skype ©, as preferred by the participants as three of the participants were located in another city or overseas. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Data were collected using a digital voice recorder and transcribed for analysis by the first researcher and provided to the relevant participant to confirm its accuracy.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions were individually analysed using IPA as outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) (see Table 1). The process includes: (a) reading and re-reading with initial notations; (b) development of emergent themes; (c) searching for connections across emergent themes; and (d) looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al. 2009). This process is a cyclical, re-iterative process, and involves constant revisiting of the transcripts seeking both convergent and divergent emergent themes that are richly highlighted in the data.

Independent audits of the transcripts were conducted by authors 1 and 2 and evaluated by author 3 to ensure validity of the themes across the data set.

Unlike nomothetic research studies, each participant is a unit of analysis on their own terms. IPA requires the researchers to suspend their own beliefs, judgement and values when interpreting the participants’ understanding of their experiences. Following independent auditing, robust discussion between the researchers is necessary to validate thematic representation of the participants’ interpretation of events.

Validity and reliability

This study followed the rigorous protocols of IPA to ensure trustworthiness, verification, credibility, and dependability. Guba and Lincoln’s (1981; 1982; 1989) earlier
recommendation that researchers conduct a post hoc evaluation to support trustworthiness, has more recently acceded to a continual process of verification involving “checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain” (p. 17, Morse, 2011). Therefore, in defining rigor in qualitative research, reliability and validity is addressed through adherence to the steps of the particular methodology utilised in accordance with its philosophical stance (Smith, 1996). As such, design quality is driven by within-design uniformity and analytic expertise (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009).

Importantly, in seeking subjective interpretations of a particular phenomenon, qualitative research is not concerned with external reality, a primary concern of validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) but rather the internal subjective account of reality. Furthermore, IPA seeks both convergent (across all transcripts) and divergent (within one transcript) themes aiming to produce rich uniqueness of themes rather than saturation of themes. In IPA, rigour is reliant on adherence to methodological steps (see Smith, 2011).

Other protocols in IPA sanction rigour including purposive sampling of a small homogenous group; funnelling down to the phenomenon being explored; and the double hermeneutic investigative focus of interviewing (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The argument for inter-rater reliability fluctuates as important or not (Armstrong, Gosling, Weissman & Marteau, 1997) whereas strict adherence to independent auditing by the researchers, prior to collaborative consensus of themes substantiated by the data, remains a crucial step in IPA protocols (see Smith et al., 2009).

Author’s perspective

Interpretative analysis is intersubjective thus the investigator is positioned relative to their own biases and presuppositions which need to be stated. The greatest threat to credibility in qualitative research is the investigators’ inability to remain open to the data, sensitive and creative in their social enquiry, and adhere to the rigorous steps of the chosen
method informed by philosophical underpinnings (Schwandt, 2015). All authors are clinicians and researchers in the field of trauma. The third author is also a qualified coaching professional. The authors challenged each other’s interpretation throughout the investigation eliminating any theme that could not be unanimously agreed by all authors.

Results

Four superordinate themes emerged which are organised as four phases in a trajectory towards personal growth: 1) Self-doubt and blame; 2) Targeted bullying; 3) Psychological vulnerability and distress; and 4) Meaning-making and personal growth. Participants’ quotations are presented to describe and illustrate these four themes. Three of the four themes describe each participant’s lived experience of the negative effects of derailment, including the distress of seeing their livelihood undermined, their goals eroded or extinguished, as well as the psychological distress and vicarious impact on their family life. The fourth theme describes subsequent meaning making and psychological growth through, and following, their redefining of the ‘self’.

Self-doubt and Blame

The first superordinate theme describes how participants perceived the initial stages of derailment, changes in life circumstances and subsequent perceived changes in mood states. It also describes doubting the efficacy of existing coping strategies and questioning of one’s capacity and self-belief.

For three of the participants, the derailment occurred following an organisational restructure. Following a doubling of his work-load, the desire to maintain his identity and the shame of failing pushed Chris towards psychological vulnerability:

I was pedalling really hard … it’s part of my character not to fail, I have a very strong sense of not wanting to fail, and so that was to the detriment of my (mental) health … I didn’t have the wisdom to step back.
Liam perceived the changes as a threat to his identity, blaming himself for not being able to adapt to the changes:

I was very angry of what they were doing to the whole structure that we set up …. I couldn’t cope with it and that’s why I cracked up.

Diana became self-critical and began doubting her abilities:

I missed out on the promotion and thought obviously I wasn’t doing something right … in the first couple of years I was almost paranoid.

Les also had thoughts of self-doubt and victimisation:

During this experience I had my doubts that maybe I wasn’t quite as good a doctor as I thought. I had a sense of injustice that I had done nothing wrong and yet I’ve been black banded from the hospital which is part of my profession; which is part of my livelihood.

**Targeted Bullying**

This theme describes internal reactions to perceived external threats to wellbeing and schema. It describes the debilitating feeling of being bullied or, as reported by Chris, being falsely accused of bullying. Feeling targeted emerged through over management to the point of micro-management, having doubts placed over one’s reputation, and being unjustly summoned to explain behaviours.

Diana felt targeted unjustly by the level of micro-management that undermined her sense of competence:

He was using isolating behaviours; one minute I’d be told that I shouldn’t be talking to a colleague…the next minute I’d be told that it was all ok…I would get my work constantly scrutinised, and he basically micro managed people until they couldn’t do anything.

Les described his initial inability to recognise that he was being targeted with bullying by his senior executive manager:
It took me a while to realise that she [the senior executive] had effectively put a black ban on me, she would veto them [my job applications] without anything in writing.

Chris experienced the shameful loss of reputation associated with derailment:

It was a difficult five months because everyone knew about the accusation, my reputation was tainted.

Les described how it impacted on his professional identity and livelihood:

There was a cloud over me. Many of the local GPs in the area they thought that I was under suspicion. It was impacting on my professional work and my livelihood.

**Psychological Vulnerability and Distress**

*Psychological vulnerability and distress* also consistently emerged as a theme across participants, and captured the cumulative effect of derailment.

I was overloaded with work, and then the false bullying and harassment claim were made against me … I didn’t spring back, I didn’t come back from those claims, and I eventually fell over … and I had strong suicidal tendencies. (Chris)

Feeling unwanted at the workplace increased vulnerability to high risk thoughts and behaviour:

I suddenly slipped down hill in a big way … I used to fly off the handle pretty easily, once, a couple of times I got into the car and took off, and disappeared for an hour, and there were a couple of times I felt like driving the car into a tree, in that 12 month period. (Liam)

Accustomed to accepting responsibility, the lack of validation and the insidiousness of bullying contributed to mental health difficulties:

I felt like a *failure* … and I just went into I suppose a depressive spiral, over a period of about six months … but I didn’t recognise that I was depressed at the time. (Diana)
The powerlessness of their situations, and feelings of being unsupported in the workplace, led to behaviour that isolated the participants from their loved ones, and vicariously contaminated other areas of their lives. Participants were not able to cope with the changes and felt that others also did not understand what they were experiencing. Both Chris and Les described breakdowns in family relationships:

We were under pressure, the kids were stressed and didn’t know what was going on … and it was one of the reasons my marriage had come to an end. (Les)

Struggling to manage the spiralling downwards sense-of-self in the aftermath of extreme invalidation, relationships suffered irreparable damage:

My anxiety and my poor reactions to some family members and their inability to understand my mental health, has caused a breakdown to those relationships. (Chris)

The decision not to complain about the bullying or the false accusations of bullying contributed to regret and a lack of closure from two participants:

In hindsight and reflection, I should have gone outside the organisation, gone to an independent person or other Government agency and taken action against these individuals. (Chris)

For some, the inability to challenge acts of injustice, resonate as unfinished business:

I haven’t entirely let it go, it’s still quite an intrinsic part of my life but it just doesn’t make it feel as depressed and as unhappy as it used to. (Diana)

Chris regretted not accepting his own limits, allowing things to “fall over”:

I should have stood my ground and basically said “no” … I should have allowed some things to fall over, and that would have proven that it didn’t work. But I proved that it did work for a couple of years because I did it, but it was at the expense of my health.

Meaning-making and Personal Growth
Participants reported that re-appraisals of new meanings were achieved after experiencing self-awareness and moments of self-realisation, and mobilisation of internal agency:

12 months later, I read an article … on psychopathic bullies … it made me feel a lot better, I actually finally felt that I had something I could hold on to, to describe what had happened (Diana)

Moments of self-realisation clarified that the fears of ongoing bullying were irrational, providing increased awareness and relief from the emotional pain of self-doubt and self-blame:

I was fearful of meeting my old boss, literally fearful, the old sweaty hands thing, and I realised at that point that a lot of what I was feeling wasn’t rational, and the churn I was having over this, and that was I suppose was a point of clarity to me. (Diana)

Les slowly began to regain his sense of direction and sought redress by taking action against what he felt was an attack on his integrity and livelihood. He began to re-honour himself and trust his judgement again:

It took me a year to wake up that this wasn’t gonna go away … It took me a while to wake up to the fact that unless I got to an external body to pass judgement on the whole issue, nothing was ever gonna change.

The distress of the burnout was reappraised as an opportunity for increased self-knowledge and better judgement:

The really important lesson that I’ve learned that in my life I’ve pushed myself too hard on too many fronts. (Chris)

Positive and genuine professional and social support resulted in feeling understood and cared for:
The thing that I’ll always remember is my doctor saying, “I understand what you’re going through, I know what the problem is and I understand it all.” (Liam)

In addition to describing the support she received from her partner, Diana in particular described the value of having a personal coach in providing her with practical solutions:

I think the personal coach has probably been the biggest impact. I mean time to some degree would almost certainly have moved me on and got me to a better place, but I think the personal coach helped the most.

One participant considered the stressful events were an opportunity for learning:

In everyone’s life a little rain must fall … about time I got a kick in the pants. (Les)

In particular, Diana redefined herself:

I got a lot fitter and socialising with friends a lot more, I’d gone back to university … I said ok I need to get fit, I need to look after myself a bit, was trying many of those [self-development] things, and reconnect with my friends … I became a bit better saying well, I’m not coping with this at the moment, maybe take some workload off me.

One participant found a level of peace by defusing the anger, shame and pain and replacing them with forgiveness:

The importance of being able to forgive and move on is a very important lesson I have learned and still learning. (Chris)

Having experienced the distress of derailment, participants expressed their desire to help others who are going through similar life changing experiences:

I hope that sometime in the future I may have the ability to speak into the lives of others who have had a similar experience … I can see and hope that it would be of assistance to others. (Chris)

Increased empathy was also reported by participants:
I find that I’m more aware of people; I can see the signs in people who are having trouble … I think I’m far more tolerant of people who are finding it tough at work than I probably was if I hadn’t gone through it. (Liam)

Significant changes in life purpose were reported. It appeared that by re-appraising her priorities, Diana’s psychological flexibility allowed her to change her identity from a senior manager to a consultant. By making this difficult decision, a very positive change occurred as she described increased contentment:

This experience has been a key to personal growth, and it probably pushed the personal growth in a quite a different line to what might have happened if I had not been in that situation, if I had not have been in that situation. (Diana)

Changes in thinking styles also resulted in significant increases in productivity:

I suppose I stopped fighting with myself on a lot of things. I actually got a lot happier and more content … I stopped being so task focused, and started sleeping again which was good … and I was probably not as productive as I am now as well. (Diana)

New meanings involved regaining the feelings of spirituality and connectedness, and regaining a sense of identity:

In my early twenties I had a quite a strong sense of self, and I felt I’d actually lost it in the corporate climb and, I think that this [the derailment experience] gave me an opportunity to regain some of that. (Diana)

One participant regained his subjective self-worth by rechannelling his energy from fighting change to adapting to the change, and re-gaining recognition for his work in an alternate field:

I get a lot of satisfaction from what I’m doing now, I’m contributing back to the industry … I think the experience that I gained since I’ve left has made me a better person. (Liam)
For another, the decision to make a formal complaint and stand up against perceived injustice was related to better outcomes and more closure. Perceptions of increased resilience, self-worth, and authenticity surfaced:

I’m far more prepared if there was ever such a second event, that I would be far more assertive and aggressive and much much quicker at not letting the issue drag on … I’m pleased I stuck it out. I would always have had the doubt that maybe she was right, maybe I wasn’t performing up to scratch … I really would have always had a cloud over me that in some way I just wasn’t performing appropriately.

(Les)

Discussion

This study provides an insider’s lens on career derailment in high level executives/professionals. Such understanding is important for coaching psychologists, particularly how these experiences provide opportunities for new meaning making, and personal and professional growth. Specifically, the implications for coaching psychologists include the importance of being aware of the early warning signs of burnout in high functioning individuals, the importance of acting on these signs with psychological flexibility as early as possible, but in a way that helps the executive to find new and more purposeful direction. The notion that career derailment may provide a springboard for positive change is a novel result and one that has significant implications for executive coaching.

Traditionally, the experiences that arise from career derailment such as burnout have been discussed in relation to which remedial clinical interventions might best be able to help the individual. Coaching psychologists are well placed to recognise and refer onwards when other services are needed. However, our research suggests that there is a larger coaching role in which the client can be helped to draw on their agency towards positive psychological outcomes. As such, coaching that facilitates self-questioning, openness to change, and maintains a growth-mindset may best help the executive overcome adversity and move
forward more purposefully. As highlighted by Webb (2006), coaches can tap into the
different stages of the lifespan and promote change as part of a life adventure that can inform
executive wisdom. Specifically, applications from positive psychology and the field of
posttraumatic growth which help clients to harvest hope, identify change, and re-author their
lives seem relevant (Joseph, 2011).

The current research offers an in-depth and rigorous qualitative investigation of four
participants but further research is needed. First, there is a need for research into what makes
for effective coaching following career derailment, but also to understand more fully what
defines successful coaching. The benefits that arose for these participants following
derailment appear to be as much related to changes in personal direction and new priorities in
life as they are to do with the enhancement of their career. Future research with executives
who report personal and professional growth subsequent to derailment might specifically
probe for what it is that they found helpful in making this transition from a state of distress
and vulnerability and to explore the relevance of the concept of posttraumatic growth.

Second, qualitative studies do not offer generalisability. However, there is no reason to
expect that our findings will not apply to other groups of professionals where derailment has
occurred due to extrinsic factors i.e., bullying or organisational restructuring. What is less
certain is whether growth is as likely when derailment occurs as a result of intrinsic
personality attributes of the individual. Future research could specifically examine the
experiences of individuals following executive derailment caused by intrinsic factors.

Third, it is important for organisations to understand that the cost of executive
derailment is high. For that reason, organisations need to be aware of the risks to their
executive staff of derailment when carrying out organisational restructuring. When
derailment is due to re-organisational strategies, organisations could promote flexible and
creative opportunities to redefine identities and grow psychologically and keep on track those
who might otherwise derail, contributing to retention of valuable individuals. Similarly, bullying at the executive level requires specific procedural and psychological support. When bullying is responsible for derailment an organisation can lose a high functioning individual who is the victim of bullying but retain the perpetrator, who may continue to disrupt productivity. Early identification of disruptive and bullying behaviours is essential. In both these situations, coaching psychologists are able to bring independent and fresh perspectives. Finally, organisations need to recognise that derailment experiences are common and work towards reducing the stigma that may be attached to it, and to understand that when derailment occurs it can actually provide opportunities for the personal and professional growth of the executive which in turn can be to the benefit of the organisation.
References


**Notations:**

[ … ] Indicates editorial elision where non-relevant material has been omitted

[ - ] Indicates pauses in speech by participant
Table 1
Steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1:</td>
<td>Step by step independent auditing by first and second authors which involved emersion in each interview data through repeated listening and reading of the recordings and transcribed verbatim transcript. Independent initial impressions and observations are recorded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2:</td>
<td>Creation of a comprehensive set of initial notes primarily noting significant content, language and concepts that appear embedded in the transcript. This is done independently at this stage with no collaboration.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3:</td>
<td>Thematic emergence occurs for both auditors that concisely captures the essence of the transcript and guides further analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4:</td>
<td>Establishing connections between emergent themes and identified clusters of themes in each individual case. Independent auditing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5:</td>
<td>These four steps were repeated for each transcript independently by the first and second authors before a final coming together for robust discussion and consideration of overall data sets that was substantiated by rich verbatim extracts for each theme. No theme was included in the final set that had not been agreed upon as being substantiated within the data. The third author acted as an independent evaluator of the final results. This included examination of sets of themes for convergent and divergent themes across all transcripts. Five subordinate themes emerged. Discussion between authors ensured identified themes were supported by the data set.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Superordinate theme identified. Linking of relevant theory to identified themes.

Table 2
Semi structured Interview questions prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How your derailment experience has impacted on your life so far?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you have made sense of your derailment experience and its impact on your life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you feel you as a person have changed because of this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about this experience in particular has impacted on you either positively or negatively?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you make sense of the human dynamics that you have been caught up in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any psychological, philosophical, existential thoughts that have altered or become part of your thinking since this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How your future will be influenced from this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has it influenced your feelings, thoughts, relationships, goals since this event?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>