

In business you don't get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate

Contributed by Mel Brooks
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The axe can fall suddenly. In many ways it's better that way. But sometimes you're aware of the axe being sharpened. And that sharpening process can be pretty grating on the nerves. I'm talking here about losing your job. Not because you fouled up, but because of corporate downsizing or reengineering, as they like to call it.

It's happening to many. There was a time when you heard of someone being retrenched. Now we all know somebody who has been chopped. We probably know a few. These people have suffered - financially, emotionally, mentally. Perhaps their biggest knock is their self esteem

There are two paths to be taken. One that becomes increasingly destructive - a downward spiral that often ends marriages, health, and lives.

But there is the other path. Just months after retrenchment, other people are happy. Perhaps they were too depressed initially, but having been forced to look around, they've found something that they really want to do. Something they actually enjoy. Many say they wish they'd had the nerve to step out of the corporate cocoon and become their own person years before.

Change, and it's very rapid change these days, requires that we all take stock of where we are, and what we are doing. A string of qualifications and a senior position don't mean job security. Managers are the most at risk. Managers are just cogs in a gearbox. They are driven by a cog - their boss, and they turn other cogs - their staff.

Now managers need to understand what's going on in the entire business process. From the sources of the raw material, to how it's processed, to whom it's sold, and why it's bought. They need to know who the competition is and what kind of threat they pose.

In the past, people were able to join large organisations and set about working their way to the top. Some, whose ambitions were frustrated by lack of progress up the ladder, changed jobs to get ahead. Things have changed. Given the changes in technology and the way business is done, you need to be prepared, not to have three or four jobs in your working life, but three or four careers! Depressing? It shouldn't be. The prospect can be exciting. With some planning, you can position yourself for the future. Here are some guidelines:

Build a reserve

Have an independent pension fund. If you do join a firm that has membership of it's pension fund as a condition of employment, make sure that if you leave, you get your contributions and theirs, out. If they tell you that the rules do not allow for this, get them to change the rules. If they really want you, they will. In business you don't get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate. Set yourself a target of having cash reserves equal to at least three month's salary. If the axe does fall, you can then plot without pressure.

Upgrade your skills

Become a businessman first and a manager second. Your employers will train you to do the things they need you to do for them. These skills may not be all that marketable. Acquire a range of skills that will allow you to fit into any organisation. Rather take the strain now, than when you're crying into your beer about the injustice of your forced departure.

Market yourself Most businesses in SA belong to some form of business or industrial association. Get involved in the association that your firm belongs to, but avoid becoming the chairman of a committee or organiser of the golf day. Rather serve on a committee that's doing something that you can learn from. Get yourself known as someone who gets things done. Ignore the politics or any spurious status, and make things happen. Apart from developing your network, you will be noticed by people who count.

Publish articles. There are dozens of trade publications who need material. They generally don't want to pay for it, so it's relatively easy to get something published. You don't have to be a boffin in your field either. If you know something about trucks, paper, plumbing… anything, an angle can be developed.

Develop a philosophy. Think along these lines. I am an (insert here your job title), a bloody good one at that, who at this time happens to be employed by x LTD. They are fortunate to have access to my services right now, but should circumstances change; I am adaptable enough to come to the rescue of some other organisation that needs me.

Keep in mind that firms buy what you can do, rather than what you know. If you can perform, people take it for granted that you know things. It's what you can do that will put you in demand.

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