

The Job Loss Survival Guide

By Jim Davis

You can also find The Job Loss Survival Guide on the Web at

www.joblossguide.com

(There may be a few minor updates on the Web version that have not yet been incorporated in the print version.)

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Introduction

In the past, job loss usually meant that one of several fairly well understood things had happened. One was simply that a person was not doing the job adequately and was fired. Another possible reason was that the company didn't have enough work for its employees, so they got "laid off," sometimes only temporarily. And another fairly common reason was that the company had gone out of business.

Several years ago, a new type of job loss came on the scene. Many businesses "down-sized" in an attempt to become more efficient, cut expenses, or in some cases to simply make more short-term profits. Employees were caught in a cultural upheaval. "Job security" was a thing of the past. People entering the job market learned to expect several career changes, not necessarily of their choosing, during their work lives.

Lately, that "new" job loss has become even more difficult to deal with. It has kept most of its original characteristics, but it also heaps on some of the worst of the job loss of the "old days" - most notably from businesses that are in trouble or even dying due to the changing economy.

When I first came into personal contact with this new kind of job loss back in 1991, I had no idea what havoc it can wreak in a person's life. I was also totally unprepared for the way the "system" operated. People who had in many cases literally dedicated their working lives to the company were unceremoniously told that they were no longer needed. In addition to being tersely notified that their jobs had ended, they were often even escorted from the building where they had worked, as if they had committed a crime. After this type of treatment, even the fact that many companies had set up job placement and retraining programs offered little consolation.

This "newest" job loss does seem to have a more compassionate aspect to it, from what I understand. Companies seem to be doing all they can to cushion the blow, in most cases. It's still devastating, though.

My experience during the early '90s was my first exposure to job-loss grief, and I didn't even recognize it as grief. In fact, it was over three years later that I began to really understand it. By then I had been "voluntarily down-sized" into an early retirement, and I was studying grief as I worked on a master's degree in counseling. I remembered that someone in one of the TVA job retraining activities had once mentioned that job loss was similar to a death, but no one apparently recognized that a grief process actually accompanies job loss. Most of the training primarily involved learning how to find another job or gaining new work skills.

Even today most people have little understanding of the job-loss grief process and how it can help them successfully survive job loss. I have tried in the following segments to help provide that understanding, as well as some basic suggestions for coping with your own grief or helping others to cope with theirs. I have also included some ideas for developing "survival skills" to use not only in the search for a new job, but also to help enhance your life in general.

I hope you find this Job Loss Survival Guide helpful, whether you have lost your job, are trying to help someone who has lost theirs, or are just trying to prepare for the future. If you have questions or comments, or if you feel I can be of help in any other way, please contact me.

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Understanding and Coping with Job-Loss Grief

Grief is perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of human life. We treat grief as an enemy. We fight it, or we try to pretend that it doesn't exist. The truth is, however, that grief is a healing process that is just as vital as the physical healing of cuts, bruises, and broken bones. And just as a severe physical injury can take a long time to heal, the death of a loved one, a divorce, or even a job loss normally means a substantial period of grief. Just as it is important to know how to take good care of ourselves during the recuperation from a physical trauma, we also need to understand how grief heals and what we must do for the healing to be complete.

Grief is usually associated with the death of a loved one, but there are other areas of life in which loss results in grief that is just as real. One of these is being experienced more and more often due to the current trend of companies to "down-size." The majority of today's working population are likely to experience at least one job loss in their career lives. Job loss can bring about a grief that is in some ways more difficult to deal with than when a loved one dies. This is because of the increased complexity of job-loss grief in today's society.

For many people today, there are two major phases of job loss. The first one is relatively new, and although it can be helpful it brings new problems, too. I call it the "pre-termination" phase. In past years, it was common for firings to be swift and merciless, but more and more companies are now providing a transition period. This is the period of time beginning with advance notification of job termination and ending with the actual job loss. It can last from a few weeks to several months. It often involves job retraining and outplacement services which are provided by the company. On the downside, it is similar to being told you have only a short time to live, or a kind of "death sentence."

The "terminated" phase begins with the actual job loss, and unfortunately is still the only phase for many people. Even though the impact of actual unemployment can be lessened by a period of preparation, the grief process is still different for this phase. Many of the emotions do carry over, but the grief is more like that associated with the loss of a loved one. A way of life has ended, along with the security it provided.

Job-loss grief is further complicated by the fact that either of the two phases may occur without the other, as well as in sequence. The "pre-termination" phase could occur alone in the case where the person finds a new and more desirable job before their current employment ends. That might be more like resigning to take a better job. The "terminated" phase may occur alone if the person is fired with no warning. Often however, even when a person finds a replacement job before unemployment begins it doesn't totally eliminate the next phase. The new job still means a new environment, new people, and possible relocation. This often involves a pay cut, reduced benefits, and starting over at the bottom of the seniority ladder.

Many times, of course, the person has trouble finding a new job even if there is a transition period. When this happens, the feelings of rejection, betrayal, anger, and other emotions often resurface. When I was in the Tennessee Valley Authority's Employee Transition Program in 1991, I served as coordinator of the Knoxville office for several months. During that time I saw this happen repeatedly, even though the program offered retraining, outplacement, and counseling. People who had been through a six month transition period without finding a job would come out of the formal termination meeting in a slightly dazed condition. Then they would appear to regress somewhat.

It wasn't until I began to study grief that I realized that what I thought was regression was really something else. It was more like the change from anticipatory grief, when you know a loved one is going to die, to the grief when death has actually occurred. In this case, however, there are some

major distinctions. One distinction is that death is universally recognized as inevitable. But, in most people's minds, job loss of any kind is still primarily associated with failure. There is also another difference when you are notified in advance. It feels somewhat like you have been told you have only weeks or months to live, but that after you die you will still have to pay all the medical bills, provide an income, care for your family, and so on. Of course, if used wisely this transition period can be extremely valuable, but at the outset it is still overwhelming.

The Job-Loss Grief Process

The “Pre-termination” Phase

Stage One: Denial

When a person is first informed that their employment is going to end, their first response is a stunned “this can’t be happening to me.” This stage may last only a few minutes, or it can last for weeks. Sometimes the person becomes convinced that management will change their minds because that has happened before.

Stage Two: Anger

After the person comes to the realization that they are really going to lose their job, they get angry. The anger is usually toward the company or the management, but often it is directed elsewhere. It is not uncommon for people to take their anger out on family or friends.

Stage Three: Bargaining

Not everyone appears to go through this stage, but at least some do. Usually, the bargaining is something like asking God to intervene in the operation of the company, or promising God all sorts of things in return for another job.

Stage Four: Depression

When it becomes obvious that termination is inevitable, depression sets in. The depression may be mild and allow the person to go on to the next stage, or it may be severe enough to inhibit normal functioning. Even when one successfully goes on to Stage Five, recurring bouts with depression are not uncommon.

Stage Five: Acceptance, or Getting On With Life

One may enter this stage before depression has completely ended. In fact, it is common for people to have to continually work to fight depression if it looks like job prospects are bleak. Those who have the most success in this stage are those who learn to manage their attitudes. They realize that success is usually the result of applying a positive attitude to keep trying, exploring alternatives, and building networks.

The “Terminated” Phase

Stage One: Numbness

Whether you have gone through a “pre-termination” phase or not, you still experience some degree of numbness and disbelief that you have actually lost your job. This may explain why some people at first act as if they think they can continue their same lifestyle on unemployment benefits.

Stage Two: Yearning

Once a person has gone through the numbness stage, they often get “homesick” for the old job. Even if they didn’t like their job, they may still miss the people, the routine, etc. This stage will also usually include anger toward the company or specific people, particularly if there was little or no transition period.

Stage Three: Disorganization and Despair

The person comes to terms with the job loss, but cannot seem to get on with life. They procrastinate about trying to find another job, partly out of fear of failure and partly out of embarrassment from being jobless. When they do begin, it is often a haphazard effort. They often become depressed.

Stage Four: Reorganization of Behavior

The person finally realizes that in order to possibly return to the quality of life they had before, they must make some changes in their life. They no longer blame anyone for the past. Instead, they focus on the future and its possibilities. They begin to plan rather than daydream. Then they act based on the plan. They develop a support network which includes family, friends, mentors, and job contacts. When they become discouraged, they then can avoid reverting back to stage three.

If a person has been able to go through an adequate and effective “pre-termination” phase, they can often minimize stages two and three of the “terminated” phase. This is particularly the case when they have been able to take advantage of support services or develop their own support group during the earlier phase.

Just as with other types of grief, a person with job-loss grief has three basic choices. They can stay at the same point and fixate, they can regress, or they can progress and go on to the next stage of living. Understanding the job-loss grief process can help them to get on to that next stage in a healthy and productive way.

Symptoms of Job-Loss Grief

These are quite similar to the symptoms of death-related grief. Some will be expressed in different ways, of course. For example, one problem that people sometimes have when a loved one dies is an inability to recall happy memories of the deceased. In the case of job loss the problem may be trouble recalling good memories of the job or career.

Family symptoms for job-loss grief may be considerably different from those for death-related grief, although there are some similarities. The two immediate tasks are the same, however. The family needs to be a primary support group and must adjust to the new situation by changing the way it operates.

Symptoms that are the same or similar:

A parent's diminished ability to parent. Parents who have lost their job often find it difficult to concentrate on the job of being a parent. They sometimes also may be afraid that their children, as well as other family members, view them as failures. This feeling can make it particularly difficult for parents to feel adequate as role models or authority figures.

Difficulties adjusting to new family roles and tasks. This can be a problem for other members of the family as well as the one who has suffered the job loss. For example, when dad tries to take over some of the duties mom has always done, the kids and mom may have as much trouble adjusting as dad does.

Difficulties remembering the "good times." The tendency is to dwell on bad feelings toward the former employer and the negative aspects of the former job. The happy memories tend to get pushed back and ignored.

Increased family disputes. Stresses due to the new family structure, the changes in the family financial situation, and the emotional trauma of job loss often result in misunderstandings and arguments. Poor communication often results, which in turn can lead to further tensions.

"Scapegoating" and blaming others. It is often easier to blame others for our problems than to take responsibility for our lives. This can especially be the case when others are responsible for things that happen to us. The majority of job loss due to "down-sizing" has little if anything to do with individual job performance. Unfortunately, however, the feelings of frustration and helplessness over those things we have no control of tend to spill over into the areas where we do have some control. Finding fault and placing blame become a way of dealing with life in general rather than taking control and assuming responsibility for what we do with our lives.

Stress-related problems. Although stress can actually be helpful in carefully managed “doses”, overwhelming stress often results in emotional or medical problems. Research shows that we become more susceptible to viruses, such as colds and flu, when we are under stress. Other physical problems, such as ulcers or high blood pressure, also often accompany prolonged stress. In addition, emotional problems such as depression can also result.

Symptoms that may be different:

Concerns and disputes about the financial future. Economic uncertainty is a natural outcome of job loss due to the loss of income. The family life-style often changes, sometimes drastically. This can result in concerns about the family’s immediate future as well as long-term plans for the children’s education or for retirement. These concerns, coupled with other stresses, often bring about family conflicts.

Concerns about having to move. This is often of greater concern to older children and adolescents than to their parents. If a move is necessary in order to get a new job, the children may feel that their lives are being uprooted unfairly. They may be unable to understand why the move is necessary, especially if they have been sheltered from the realities of the job loss.

Worries about what friends will think about unemployed status. Job loss is often accompanied by feelings of fear of how others will react. This fear may be enhanced by the reactions of former coworkers whose jobs were not affected. Many times those people will distance themselves from those who have lost their jobs because they simply don’t know what to say or how to act. Unfortunately, this reaction is often perceived as rejection.

Providing a Support Structure for Others

Here are some suggestions for helping anyone who is going through job-loss grief.

Remember that grief takes time. The death of a loved one normally requires a grief period of two years. Job-loss grief also often takes a substantial amount of time.

Encourage the person to talk, and listen openly and actively. This not only lets them know that you care, but it is also therapeutic. Talking about their emotions and feelings helps them to vent emotions and also to accept the reality of the situation.

Avoid pat answers and clichés. Such “helpful” comments as “some things are just meant to be,” or “every cloud has a silver lining” may be more frustrating than they are helpful. Even offering advice about possible job alternatives with statements such as, “Hey, I bet you’d be good at” may be better unsaid unless they really reflect the person’s abilities or interests.

Be available. People have as much trouble knowing what to say to someone who has just lost their job as to one who has had a death in their family. Just being there is important. This can help them overcome the fear of what others think of them due to their job loss.

Help them to “regrieve.” It’s usually easy for them to dwell on the shortcomings of the former job, but remembering the achievements and the fun times is important, too. Also, if they can overcome the tendency to dwell on the negative aspects of their former employment, as well as their termination, they will be better prepared to interview for new jobs.

Practical day-to-day help, such as helping with chores or errands, is important. Rather than just asking if there is anything you can do, offer to do things you know need to be done. This eliminates the tendency to avoid asking for help for fear of imposing. Also, particularly in the early stages of job-loss grief, people may even be unaware that some tasks are not being done. Or, they may simply be too overwhelmed to care.

Being part of a job search network can be very helpful. Networking is the most effective way of finding a new job. However, be careful not to appear that you are trying to take over the job search.

Offer to be a job coach. Offer to listen to ideas, help do mock interviews, help form job search strategies, and help find areas where changes might be helpful.

Suggestions for Managing Your Own Job-Loss Grief

Be open about what has happened to you. Don't be afraid to say, "I lost my job." You may be surprised at how many people you meet have had similar experiences.

Become part of a support group. It can be especially helpful to talk to (and listen to) a group of people who are in your situation. Often just finding out that there are others with your same concerns and fears can be a great help in dealing with those feelings.

Process your emotions. Admit your anger, fear, and frustrations to your support group, your family, and your friends. When you allow yourself to do this you are taking the first step toward managing your emotions instead of letting them control you.

Affirm yourself. You may feel guilty for letting your family down even though you know your job loss had nothing to do with anything you did. Or you may have missed out on a job opportunity that would have kept you employed. Once you resolve this guilt you can move on.

Renew and deepen relationships. Your marriage and family, as well as your friends, can be a source of strength that is stronger than you realized. Having someone you can lean on and rely on can be crucial in times of trouble. Also, there may be times when you need someone to "give you a shove" when you become discouraged.

Maintaining or renewing spirituality can be just as helpful as your relationships with other people. Your personal beliefs and your relationship with God can give you support even when other people are not available for support. Your spirituality can help you develop your "inner strength" to deal with hardships, and it can also help you find an "inner peace" that can be just as beneficial.

Keep your sense of humor. Laughter is as important to your health as physical exercise and a good diet. Just as it is important to exercise on a regular basis, it is important to maintain your sense of humor on a regular basis. If you don't already read the daily comics, that can be a good start. Also, learn to look for humor in everyday situations, especially things that happen to you. Learning to laugh at yourself is one of the best ways to have a healthy self-image.

Variables -- The Uniqueness Factors

Although it is helpful to realize that there are other people who are going through similar feelings and emotions, there are always variables that make each situation unique. These variables also affect the severity of the grief, the time it takes to go through it, and the effect the job loss has on your life. Some of those factors are:

The person's age. Losing a job can be devastating at any age, but for older people it can be especially difficult.

Length of time with the company. When a person has been with a company for many years, there is a much stronger sense of loss. This can be compounded when retirement is only a few years or even months away.

Whether they have been through job loss before. This may have either a positive or a negative impact. For some people, having had "practice" with job loss enables them to look at it as something they can better deal with because of their experience. For others, subsequent job losses are even more difficult to deal with.

Their feelings about the job/company. If a person has been a dedicated employee who loved their job, the job loss will probably be much more traumatic than for the person who has been dreaming of a career change. However, just because a person dislikes their job or the company they work for does not mean they will take job loss easily. Often these people have the most difficulties of all.

Their family situation. This probably has more potential variations than any of the other "variables." For example, single, young people are often considered to be able to cope relatively easily with job loss. This can be true, but their emotional ties to their family, a parent's illness, or any number of other factors make one person's experience different from another. The list of different potential family factors is practically endless. Not only are there different kinds of relationships such as those between spouses, parents and children, or brothers and sisters, but other factors such as family traditions, beliefs, and values are also involved.

The person's emotional health. Emotional health problems are more difficult for most people to deal with than physical problems, and this may be intensified by job loss. Many people see emotional problems such as depression as a "weakness" that they must hide. An additional complication of emotional health problems often results in physical problems, such as ulcers or high blood pressure, as well.

The quality/availability of support services. A number of companies now provide transition assistance to employees whose jobs are being eliminated. This assistance may include counseling, training in interviewing and job-search skills, or job placement services. The type and quality of these support services varies, and in some cases amounts to only token support. And, of course, there are still many companies which offer nothing more than severance pay.

One other important thing to realize is that the stages of the grief process are variable themselves. They don't have a set duration, and they don't always occur in the same order. The

importance of understanding the stages is to better understand the process. When one understands what is happening to them they can find comfort in that understanding. Proper understanding and a good support system usually are sufficient for most people to successfully go through their grief.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that just as with other types of grief, the purpose of job-loss grief is healing. It is a natural healing, and it hurts. And just as with physical healing, grief usually leaves scars. Usually, though, the scars left by grief are invisible ones. Just remember that regardless of whether scars are visible or not, they can be badges of courage or marks of despair. We each make our own decisions about which they will be.

Developing Your Survival Skills

In addition to being a healing process job-loss grief is also a survival process. It isn't a new way of life that will go on indefinitely. It may seem to take forever, but it will eventually come to an end.

Of course, life may never be the same again. In some cases this change is for the better in every way. You may find a better job, develop closer family ties, and learn that you have abilities that you never even dreamed of. On the other hand, the new situation you find yourself in may not turn out to be what you hoped for. Finances may become strained. There may not be any jobs available that you are qualified for. The only jobs you can find may require you to move or to retrain. If this happens, you may find that the results of the healing of job-loss grief are somewhat like the healing which some people experience after a severe physical injury such as a broken bone. For example, people who have had a broken leg often experience some pain or discomfort for years after the break has healed. In some cases a person even has to make some permanent changes, such as wearing a built-up shoe when the leg is shorter after it heals or giving up sports that involve running. And all this can happen even when they do everything they are supposed to do for healing to be complete. In a case like this, or with other losses such as loss of limbs or even job loss, successful survivors focus on what they can still do instead of their limitations.

This doesn't mean that they never look back, though. Actually, the past often holds the keys to their success. It may turn out to be like the true survival experience of two private airplane pilots I'll call John Odom and Walter Mathis.

Several years ago, John and Walter were taking a weekend trip, flying a small, rented plane. According to the weather report, it looked like a fairly good day for flying. Unfortunately, about half way into their journey, they ran into a violent storm that they couldn't go over or around, and they couldn't go back because the storm had surrounded them. Visibility was zero, and the turbulence was giving the small plane a buffeting. They didn't have any choice but to try to fly through it, and neither of them was an instrument rated pilot. It was rough going, but luckily they lived to tell the story. Or was it just luck?

It turned out that John and Walter flew a lot together, and since flying was pretty expensive, they figured out a way they could both log flying time. One would always fly "under the hood" which means he wore a device that kept him from seeing out the windows. This forced him to use the plane's instrument panel in order to fly. The other pilot was always alert and ready to take over if necessary. Neither one of them ever dreamed that this would save their lives, but during the storm nature provided the "hood." The training they had done on their own was the reason they survived.

Even though you may not believe this right now, you have something in common with John and Walter. You have survival skills that you have developed over the years, without even knowing it. What you have to do now is to identify those abilities and figure out how to put them to work. John and Walter were not intentionally preparing for the emergency they found themselves in, but they were prepared for it anyway. They could have panicked, because they weren't actually qualified to meet the challenge that they faced. They chose, instead, to meet the challenge head-on by using the skills they had developed.

The abilities that you discover in yourself may not be the answer to all your problems. They may just help you get through some rough spots. As far as I know, neither John nor Walter ever became professional pilots or even got their instrument ratings. They just got through a really rough situation successfully.

You may find that you are able to use these previously untapped skills to get a temporary job that you never considered. It may just put food on the table for a while, or it may open new doors. You may find abilities and interests that provide the gateway to an entirely new career. You may have developed abilities through hobbies or volunteer work that you can use in ways you never thought of. Or, you may have had work experiences outside your "job description" that may now

point you in a new direction. That is how I wound up pursuing a counseling career after I took “early retirement” after 25 years in a highly technical job as a computer systems analyst. I realized that my interests had changed over the years in the direction of working to help people solve their personal problems rather than their technical ones. And I have been amazed at the basic similarities between these two seemingly unrelated types of work.

As you develop your list of your “survival skills,” you may notice that what many people call “surviving” is a lot different from what you are going through. Survival seems to have another meaning to many people nowadays. It’s common to hear conversations that start something like this. “How’s it going?” “Oh, all right, I guess. Just trying to survive.” Maybe people think that this attitude helps them to cope with day-to-day living, but what they are actually talking about is “just getting by,” not surviving.

True survival takes a great deal of effort. But is it enough just to survive, or is there more to life than that? Consider the experiences of people who lived through Nazi concentration camps, Vietnam POWs, flood and earthquake victims, or situations like John and Walter went through. What can we learn from them?

There are several reasons why people become survivors. One is luck. We have all read of people who survived lightning strikes, floods, or tornadoes. We don’t have much control of those situations, except perhaps to avoid them. Most people become survivors, though, because of something they do. They may train to be ready for crisis situations, such as John and Walter did. They may call on inner strengths they have due to the values and beliefs they have developed. Many of the survivors of the Holocaust and the POWs who survived imprisonment in North Vietnam did so because they had a vision of their future that they would not give up. It was a vision they actively worked toward, even though things looked hopeless to others in the same situation.

Whatever hardships they may have faced, these survivors all had one trait in common. They never gave up. They didn’t depend on luck, although they took advantage of any that came their way. They knew that there were no guarantees that they would succeed, but they did everything they could anyway. Many of them continued to use the attitudes they had developed to survive their ordeals and went on to make a real difference in their lives and in the world. They realized better than anyone else that “just getting by” is not a real survival experience. They are the ones we can really learn the most from.

When you lose your job it is really easy to let yourself get bogged down in the “just trying to get by” attitude. It’s particularly difficult when you are dealing with the depression of job-loss grief. There are several things you can do, however, to avoid getting caught in that trap or to work your way out of it.

Here are some ways to get started:

- **Create a vision of what you want your future to be.** Then plan how you can make the vision become real, and work toward it a step at a time. It's best to actually write out your plan so you can make it more definite in your mind. You might consider it your personal "business plan." After all, you are now in the "business" of finding a job. Just be sure to remember that a good plan is a working tool. You will probably change it considerably over time based on what works or doesn't work, even if your vision doesn't change. One of the most valuable things about planning is that it helps you make progress without repeating the same mistakes. Instead, you remember those mistakes and learn from them.
- **Develop the skill of self-discipline, or "self-leadership."** It is easy to let procrastination sabotage your job search, as well as other aspects of your life. Self-leadership is particularly important now, because you are now "your own boss," whether you like it or not. Learn to lead yourself by setting specific goals in small steps and rewarding yourself with something you like each time you reach a goal. You will find it works better than driving yourself and then berating yourself when you don't meet your own expectations.
- **Learn to communicate actively.** This involves more than just talking and listening. Learn to understand others' body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues. Learn to communicate your own understanding and interest by rephrasing what the other person says, using good eye contact and your own body language.
- **Try to learn something new every day** and use it to make your life, or someone else's life, better. Remember that there is no one you can't learn something from. Some of your best ideas will often come from some of the most "unlikely" people. Also remember that you can get lots of new ideas and knowledge from books and tapes, or by taking classes. And, of course, there will always be your own mistakes for you to learn from. Learn to value those mistakes, because they will provide the best experience you can find.
- **Don't try to do everything by yourself.** Let others know what you are trying to do and ask for help when you need it. Find someone, preferably a friend who has a job, to be a mentor and a job coach. They can help give you new perspectives on problems you face, and they can also point out areas where you can make improvements.
- **Find ways to help others with their problems as well.** You will find that when you reach out to others who need help you often gain more than the person you helped.
- **And never give up.** You may have to change your tactics or even your goals, but you don't ever have to quit.

As you develop your survival skills, you will find that you won't answer, "Oh, just trying to survive" when someone asks how things are going. You won't necessarily always say "Great!" either, but you will know what you want out of life, and you won't just be waiting for it to happen. Also, when you get that next job you will find that these skills will be just as helpful there as they were in getting the job.

A Crucial Survival Skill

Regardless of what other “survival skills” that you discover or develop, there is one which I believe is absolutely crucial to your success in life. It is the attitude of “always do a little more than you have to.” You can start with something as simple as picking up a piece of trash that someone else left, but you’ll be surprised how rewarding it can become. Also, when this attitude becomes a part of your everyday life you may find that it makes the critical difference in getting your next job. It’s not uncommon to find that top executives, as well as others in influential positions, share this trait.

Here’s an example of what this attitude did for one of them (from an article in Reader’s Digest back in June, 1984.)

Roone Arledge, head of ABC’s news and sports divisions, explains how he got his first break:

During college summer vacations I worked at an inn in Chatham, Mass. One night a family had driven a long way, and when they arrived the dining room was closed. The hostess refused to seat them, but, as headwaiter, I interposed. "I can't let you be disappointed," I said. "Come in and I'll wait on you." They were very grateful, and before they left they took my name.

The day I walked into the office at DuMont television (a pioneering network), the man in charge of programming looked up and asked, "How's everything at the Wayside Inn?" It turned out that he was the person who had driven down for dinner that summer night, and he had never forgotten that I stayed to wait on him. From the instant he recognized me, I had the job.

Ernie Hickman isn’t a top executive, but he shows this attitude on a daily basis. He is the owner-operator of East Tennessee Auto Repair “out in the country” as we say, about three miles from my house. He has a reputation that eliminates the need for any advertising. He will solve the problem that other mechanics have given up on a lot of times simply because he hates to give up, but often also because he knows more. The main reason he is successful, though, is that he does a little more than he has to -- sometimes a lot more -- and often won't even take any pay for it. He'll say, "Aw, I really didn't do anything much." And technically, he'll be right. But when he noticed a broken place in the fuel line going to my truck's carburetor and replaced it without charge, it meant a lot to me even if he didn't think much of it. He does take the country hams I give him every year, though.

Why do some people have this attitude? There are probably several reasons. Sometimes it’s pride in their work. Most will claim that it was just the way they were brought up. I guess the real reason for people doing a little more than they have to is simply that they care about the people they are dealing with.

People who “do a little more than they have to” usually don't consider themselves to be doing anything unusual. I certainly didn't when I was working part-time at the Whiteway Variety Store while I was going to college. One night near closing time I was sweeping up, and I happened to be near the checkout counter. A lady was paying for her purchase and hadn't realized she lacked a few cents having enough money. She was about to use a silver dollar she carried with her as a keepsake, so I just reached in my pocket and handed her the fifteen cents or so that she needed. She wouldn't have been more appreciative if I had paid for her entire purchase.

Jack Lewis, the store manager, had started me off on the right foot for this through his basic policy. He told me to always do anything I could to help a customer. If a customer needed a box to

carry a purchase in, I was to empty a box that had not been unpacked if necessary. If we didn't have an item the customer needed, and I could think of alternatives, I should suggest them or maybe refer the customer to another store, even if it were a competitor. The customer was our reason for being. Of course, he never suggested that I pay for people's purchases.

One night at about eight o'clock a man came in with a problem. One of the battery clamp bolts on his car battery had broken and he couldn't find any auto parts stores open (this was back in 1967.) I knew we didn't have anything in our limited hardware section that would do the job, but we did have a "junk box" in the back that had all kinds of odds and ends including various screws and bolts. I managed to find a bolt that would work for him and gave it to him at no charge. I didn't get a sale that night, but I got a customer.

This attitude has served me well over the years. Of course, I really developed it when I was just a boy by observing my parents, but these incidents helped me to solidify my values as an adult. And my wife and I have been able to pass this attitude of living on to our sons, who have both found it to be just as helpful as it has been to us.

If you have not already developed this "survival skill," it's not too late no matter how old you may be. You will be amazed at the difference it can make in your life, your family, and your career.

Note: The stages of the "pre-termination" phase of job-loss grief were inspired by the stages of grief identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross for those facing their own death. The stages of the "terminated" phase were based on C.M. Parkes' stages of grief for those who have lost loved ones.

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