From the Editor-in-Chief's Desk: Job Loss as Status Passage for Workers During Recession—Advocating a “Compassionate Turn”

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Published online: 29 May 2009

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As the recession deepens around the globe, we hear not merely dire predictions of doom in the future, but the prospect of job loss increasing for potentially thousands of people. The headlines shout: thousand of jobs to go; unemployment rates rise; the economy is contracting. Individual businesses and entire industries are in trouble. In light of this, I would like to talk a little bit about the status passage that inevitably accompanies a person losing their job, and how people and organizations might helpfully respond to that. With the recession deepening, the chance that you, or someone you know, will be faced with the life transition of the passage from work, or of giving another the news of this transition, is increasing every day. It is something that both employees and employers should be concerned about.

Life transitions are a passage from one life experience to another, and embrace a process consisting of changes in experience, perceptions, meanings, a passage of time, and associated outcomes of the transition (Rasmussen *et al.* 2007). Transitions, such as the passage from work, commence with a turning point. In this case, the turning point is likely to be knowledge of an impending layoff or redundancy. The status passage that follows (Glaser and Strauss 1971) is the transition from an old life (life with a job) to a new life (life without a job). Status passages are characterized by important changes in the behaviors and consequences for the person involved. Constituent properties of status passages relevant for those losing their job might include whether the passage is experienced as collective, aggregate, or solo; whether the passage is an individual or multiple passage; the temporal aspects of the social mobility associated with it; the potential (un)desirability of the passage; the potential (ir)reversibility of the passage; the potential (un)controllability of the passage; and the shape of the passage (i.e., how quickly life changes might be felt) (Glaser and Strauss 1971).

Turning points or life events are triggers of significant life changes, and require those affected retrospectively to identify and reflect upon the upheaval they experience and, especially, the ways in which this upheaval may affect their lives (Ronka *et al.* 2003; Liddle *et al.* 2004; George 2001). Losing one's job has been recognized as a turning point or life

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event that can cause instability in the lives of bearers (Rasmussen *et al.* 2007). A turning point also results in a fundamental shift in the meaning, purpose, or direction of that person's life and includes a self-reflective awareness of or insight into the significance of the change (Clausen 1995; Rasmussen *et al.* 2007). Turning points are unpredictable and uncontrollable, provoking life transitions that can change people's life courses in either positive or negative directions (Gotlib and Wheaton 1997; Rasmussen *et al.* 2007). For people who lose their job, the outcomes are significant, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and disruptive life changes.

Life transitions, such as the loss of a job, can be either planned (as with voluntary redundancy) or unexpected (such as an involuntary redundancy or layoff). Job loss is also classed as a situational transition. Unlike developmental transitions that are an unavoidable part of our life's journey (e.g., puberty and menopause), situational life transitions are (mostly) unexpected events that can occur at any point in one's life (Jarrett 2000; Liddle *et al.* 2004). Importantly, situational transitions are processes or movements that occur in a nonlinear way, and may recur throughout the course of one's life (e.g., Kralik 2002; Ellison and Rayman 1998; Rasmussen *et al.* 2007). Being made redundant on more than one occasion would be an example. Transitions such as these have the capacity to resonate both backward and forward in the biography of the individual concerned (Prout 1989). The loss of a job will be felt by that person for a very long time.

So, life transitions and status passages have many characteristics to consider, including how they are experienced, how they develop, and how they function within social contexts (Wheaton 1990; Rasmussen *et al.* 2007), including those surrounding roles both in and out of our workplaces. For example, Blair's (2000) model describes the transition from the point of view of the person experiencing the transition, and gives attention to the types of coping used, any prior planning that may be undertaken, and any feelings of control (or lack of control) associated with the situation or circumstances now being faced (Blair 2000). Let's talk now about what people losing their job might do, feel, and think.

Goffman (1963, p. 123) confirmed that mid-twentieth century America held a benchmark identity norm for a male at that time as being young, married, white, urban, Protestant, and a father; having a college education; being fully employed; having a good complexion, weight, and height; and, ideally, participating in sports. As we steam through the twenty-first century, while we might find women now also featuring more prominently in these work-related discussions, the reality of work and working does not always marry up with routine expectations of what a "normal" working existence might be. Even without the recession, the changing employment reality for many recognizes expectations of longer working hours for full-time workers, rising unemployment, increased casualization of labor, along with more part-time workers, temporary workers, off-site workers, e-workers, underemployed workers, and older workers. Despite the reality though, the normalized expectation for many workers is to remain in full-time employment in their chosen field until they decide to retire. We see the concept of choice to be a key ingredient of a satisfactory working life.

So, what happens to workers who believed themselves to be "normal" workers (i.e., full-time workers currently employed in their chosen mode of work) and who now find themselves unemployed (perhaps for the second or third time)? Goffman (1963) reminded us of the realities of having a spoiled identity, an undesired differentness, or, importantly here, of being discreditable. Workers who have lost their jobs face the dilemma of whether or not to display their newfound unemployed identity. Whether their expectations of employment are based on reality or not, they will often believe themselves to be undesirably "different" from those around them if they lose their job.

They may choose to cope with this by employing a broad range of strategies to survive the inevitable, potentially uncomfortable, social negotiations that come with being part of any kind of collective when one has bad news to share, especially if that bad news potentially paints one in a less than creditable light. For the unemployed person, in addition to the shift in employment reality, time spent with the family, community, or social club, or time spent standing with other parents watching your child's soccer (or baseball, softball, netball, tennis, golf, or cricket) game from the sidelines can become a perilous social abyss where one's strategy of disclosure of the discreditable identity additive—in this case, being unemployed—must be carefully considered, and best done well ahead of time.

To avoid potential embarrassment, humiliation, or other social sanctions that may accompany the role of the unemployed person, affected people may adopt a number of strategies. I will examine three that Goffman (1963) shared with us some decades ago. Despite the passage of time and shifts in employment realities, the strategies of passing (what I have termed Strategy 1), covering (Strategy 2), and withdrawal (Strategy 3) are still relevant today. When passing, the unemployed person may choose to hide the source of their stigma by hiding the fact that they are unemployed—by passing themselves off as employed. They may do this by various means: at one end of the continuum, they may simply change the subject if asked directly about their work. At the other extreme, unemployed persons may create an impression for those who matter to them that they are, in fact, still employed, nurturing this impression by perhaps continuing to get up early every morning to shower, dress, and go to “work” at the normal time, even when they no longer have a job to go to. Their new “work” may well now entail looking for new work. Strategy 1 may continue until such time as a new job is found, the impression management strategy falters, or their secret is otherwise exposed.

Goffman (1963) identified another approach for those faced with being found to be discreditable, and termed it covering. I call it Strategy 2. When using this approach, the discreditable person (here, an unemployed person) aims to reduce the significance of their stigma by minimizing their loss in the eyes of others. So, the unemployed person may indicate to friends and family, colleagues, or their former employer that they will quickly find another job. They may reinforce this by informing the listener that, as a matter of fact, the “headhunters” have already heard that they are on the market again, so things are looking very good indeed. They may also fervently argue that they were intending to resign anyway, they already had several irons in the fire, and they didn't want to remain in their last job anyway. Better still, they assure their avid listeners that they have now decided to retire a little early, start their own business, become a house-husband/house-wife, downshift, or finally make that sea change they have been talking about for years. So, all is good, they claim. But some of us may not believe them.

Finally, the unemployed worker's other Goffmanesque strategy (which I have termed Strategy 3) is to withdraw from social interaction altogether (Goffman 1963) so as to avoid completely the need to disclose or discuss their unemployment circumstances. This, of course, is not recommended as such complete social withdrawal is likely to be accompanied by even higher rates of suicide, financial hardship, drug use, loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy, depression, and relationship strain than those engaged in Strategies 1 and 2. However, despite the dangers, Strategy 3 is not without its disciples in the ranks of the unemployed.

Given my observations on the uptake of these strategies (or variations of them) by those finding themselves to be either unemployed or facing job loss, I have formed the view that a large slice of the problem surrounding job loss is the potential humiliation that

accompanies it, humiliation that is experienced in the face of those whom we care about the most: friends and family, professional networks, and (former) colleagues. Humiliation is the perceived inability to exhibit a socially expected reaction to a situation where that person is deprived of his or her dignity—as defined by a given community. I have elsewhere linked the experience of losing of one’s job to loss of dignity and humiliation, even grief (Vickers 2009). However, feeling humiliated is also related to an assessment by others of the unemployed person’s socially relevant (in)capacities or (lack of) power. Feeling humiliated means feeling powerless, especially when that feeling is not of one’s choice (Czarniawska 2008). I point also to Alain de Botton’s words, in *Status Anxiety* (2004), which confirm that:

The impact of low status should not be read in material terms alone. The penalty rarely lies, above subsistence levels at least, merely in physical discomfort. It lies also, and even primarily, in the challenge that low status poses to a sense of self-respect. Discomfort can be endured without complaint for long periods when it is unaccompanied by humiliation.... To feel that we are taken no notice of necessarily disappoints the most ardent desires of human nature. (de Botton 2004, pp. 12–13).

Losing one’s job is indeed a status passage to be endured. It houses many of the potentially negative properties that Glaser and Strauss (1971) identified as being significant to a negative shift in status. Losing one’s job is likely to be: undesirable, inevitable, abrupt, irreversible, uncontrollable, involuntary, and hard to communicate to others. And, for all these reasons, it is also likely to be humiliating. So, the message is simple: find ways to reduce the humiliation for those affected, and then find ways to increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Doing this for those who must leave will make the experience of job loss and unemployment easier to endure. This can be done as a friend, colleague, parent, child, sibling, employer, or board member.

Giving people the power of choice, even to make small choices, can help save that person from feeling humiliated, no matter what other observers might think (Czarniawska 2008). It is important for individuals during turning points and life events, such as job loss, to be able to exercise personal choice during challenging life events and transitions (Ronka *et al.* 2003; Liddle *et al.* 2004). Individuals faced with job loss will be less humiliated if they are able to exercise as much choice as possible during the separation process, especially with regard to their personal outcomes. Organizations undertaking redundancies might consider what choices can legitimately and professionally still be made available for people being made redundant. These might, for instance, involve enabling choices pertaining to the timing, process, and disclosure of the redundancy—and are simple acts of compassion.

As I think about this status passage and the many others individuals might face during recession, I encourage readers of *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* to think about these and other issues that accompany the recession we are currently experiencing, and to write about them so that we all might learn a little more. I, for one, am a firm advocate of individuals, groups, and organizations taking a “compassionate turn,” especially during challenging times. I point to Frost’s (1999) view that the role of compassion can and does have an impact on thinking and doing professional work and that the recognition of the human being in any situation—including job loss and unemployment—is an outcome where a hurt individual will be better off as a result of a compassionate act, as will the organization involved. Witnessing acts of compassion, especially in the face of harsh economic and workplace realities, can affect us all in a positive way—by raising our spirits, by influencing

our acts and those of others positively, and by enabling a fundamental engagement with compassion, aliveness, and inspiration that is so central to all that we do. I look forward to hearing from you.

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