



# Failure becomes the norm - On career disruption counselling

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## Abstract

Today, linear career paths are the exception rather than the rule in professional biographies. Breaks in professional development, such as losing one's job, not being promoted, failing in a function or while self-employed are critical life events in biographies that require professional reorientation. Competent counselling may boost employees' and managers' optimism, self-efficacy and sense

of coherence in order to ensure their employability. This article gives concrete indications on how a counselling process can be designed in such a way that it activates the resources that support coping with occupational crises. The emotional work needed in this specific counselling segment will be discussed as well as the specific task profile for coaches dealing with professional failure.

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*Counsellors and coaches have to deal with career disruptions more and more often.*

*But how must a counselling process be designed so that it activates resources that contribute to overcoming career crises?*

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Nowadays, linear career paths are the exception rather than the rule in professional biographies. Normal employment relationships are becoming fewer, patchwork careers (alternating phases of work and other activities such as further education, child-rearing periods or a circumnavigation) and combination biographies (several activities in parallel), on the other hand, are increasing. One consequence of this is an increased demand for career counselling. Losing one's job, not being promoted, failing in a function or as a self-employed person as well as unsuccessful training and further education are critical life events in biographies that make professional reorientation necessary. Managers have to face the challenge of designing increasingly open careers. Although these provide great flexibility, they also carry the risk of failure. Competent counselling can help to secure employability and maintain adaptability to constantly changing demands as well as increase optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity and a sense of coherence.

In the discourse on career counselling, one speaks of protean developments in this context. Here, careers are understood - in reference to Proteus from Greek mythology

- as the ability to actively adapt to ever-changing working conditions and to safely manage the resulting different identities. Disruptions, critical life events, failures and also personal defeats can be found in almost every biography. A crisis that has been overcome increases the resilience of the person concerned and strengthens them for future crises and challenges. The targeted use of counsellors or coaches during career disruptions therefore has a psycho-hygienic function for the person seeking advice and for their future employment relationships. After all, it is a matter of working through grief, anger, powerlessness, indignation, disappointment, mortification and thus feelings that can inhibit a reorientation if left unprocessed. Accordingly, the guiding questions are: What emotional work is needed in this specific counselling segment? What is the task profile for coaches when dealing with professional failure?

### **The changing task profile**

Although leaving and starting over have become an integral part of professional careers, coaches prefer to work on developing their clients' careers. By searching for talent and balancing fits between potential jobs and competencies, they are involved in system building rather than system decay. Since counselling for system building promises significantly more narcissistic gratification, there are often blind spots among counsellors here and they - just as mistakenly as some system members - adhere to the strategy of "preservation at all costs". Counsellors - like their clients - develop resistance to change. Those who bring their own experiences of separation at the workplace before their inner eye will probably quickly realise how difficult it can be to say goodbye and how essential the question of the voluntary nature of the departure is. In order to accompany career disruptions, personal sensitisation to the topic of leaving is just as necessary as the systematisation of separation experiences such as

job cuts, work in temporary projects, change of location and much more. Counsellors should visualise successful change processes (What conditions made this possible?) and analyse failed processes (What went wrong?). And they should reflect on their own experiences. How did I experience my own departures from companies? What was conducive? What hindered?

### **The accompaniment of emotional processes**

The burden on the coach can be outlined as follows:

- Often, there is anger about the changes demanded. But anger also arises as a response to the mortification that commonly results from being confronted with the reality principle (e.g. the impending insolvency of a company). Feelings of degradation and powerlessness are expressed through anger. A solution is sought in the process of rebelling or clinging to the existing. Attempts to shift the inner conflict are typical and manifest themselves in negative images about the old organisation, the "evil" system environment and the colleagues or superiors who do not show solidarity. This aggressive mourning energy must be turned around productively in the counselling process.
- Paranoid fantasies can occur in addition to these grieving reactions. Not infrequently, delusional processing modes, which express themselves in delusions of impoverishment and exaggeratedly perceived existential threats, can be found. Sometimes denial of reality, numbness and avoidance of confrontation with the changing systemic environment prevail. These reactions also need to be resolved.
- Sometimes one also finds phenomena that can be described as a "flight into activism". Here, for example, the crisis is attempted to be overcome by quick application activities that have not been thought through. Here, too, it is important to direct energy appropriately.

### **Guiding ideas for process support**

The distinction between explicit requests for counselling during professional crises and counselling during critical professional life events in the course of a coaching process seems central. The former are much easier to plan and thus less irritating. The coach gets the chance to decide for or against such a contract. Basically, in professional crisis situations such as termination or insolvency of the company, the counselling client's individual resonances to the topics of parting, separation, death are evoked and can thus be worked on.

The coaches first need help in becoming aware of the crisis. The coach's task is to "decelerate" the emotional processes that are often quite affectively charged. It is crucial to listen with maximum respect. The coach's attitude resembles an exploration of the inner state in which they should allow as little pleading as possible. In this form of crisis intervention, it is often necessary for the coach to show a higher level of activity than usual, to provide active emotional support and to show affection. Depending on the client's affective state, cathartic reactions need to be facilitated and supported, i.e. helping to express grief, anger, pain and guilt. In the case of imminent affective flooding, on the other hand, the focus should be on communicating possibilities for containment and self-control (cf. Möller & Prantl, 2006). In this first phase of counselling, the focus is not on interpreting or explaining, but on providing support in confronting reality in order to counteract denials, distortions of reality and

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*What emotional work is needed in this specific counselling segment?*

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harmful regression in the form of addictive substance use or imploding withdrawal. The “victims” first need space to complain. Blame should also be allowed to a limited extent, although the coach must be aware that, in this mode, clients are still in an old frame of reference that can be described as rather clinging. The coach can diagnose the client’s strategy for dealing with parting and make suggestions for change if necessary.

When working with career disruptions, the client’s personal history of loss, farewell and separation is evoked almost automatically. Unprocessed terminations of professional and personal nature emerge. Terminations instead of farewells are reawakened. An appropriate accompaniment of such processes in the here-and-now certainly offers the chance of making emotionally corrective experiences in the there-and-then. Successful separation work can have a healing effect retrospectively, since earlier separations can also be processed retrospectively through the processing of present separations. Successful separation experience can lead to crisis immunisation, and coping with current partings can have an anticipatory effect. The confrontation with one’s own finiteness, the recognition of a complementary affect to growth orientation and the constant pursuit of peak performances, the experience of the one’s own limited feasibility can certainly lead to personal growth and strengthen a defence formation needed for the modern working world.

The coach accompanies mourning processes and detects which hopes, expectations and wishes have been disappointed. In doing so, they should be careful to interpret fruitless arguments as such and to use productive coping strategies against them. It is crucial to maintain the dialogue and to ensure that communication does not break down. This can also be done by naming displaced conflicts as such. Coaching is also about identifying trans-

ferences, i.e. shadows of the past that are not related to the current situation but are powerful at distorting current perception. Working on transference, which is typical for coaching, can enable coachees to distinguish here-and-now from there-and-then and thus to regain sovereignty in the current situation. Only then will it be possible to develop tolerance to ambiguity. The client can increasingly face the career disruption in a more rational way: What have I really lost and which loss may represent a relief, a discharge or even redemption of one’s own hardships?

For the constructive processing of career disruptions, it is important, against the background of appreciating one’s achievements, to also confront one’s own shares in the failure along with the accompanying feelings of shame and guilt. Disappointment over unrealised visions and fantasies must be expressed, the unfinished must be named: Unsaid and undone things, missed opportunities have to be looked at and the impossibility of making amends has to be endured together. This phase of work is sometimes marked by enduring depressive phases in the counselling process.

Only then can new perspectives be developed and promising new tasks be sought. The coachee gradually begins to write a new story about themselves. Once this turn is completed, the role of the coach changes and they can now offer help in decision-making. If this constructive change remains unsuccessful, regardless of whether internal or external reasons are to be blamed, it will be a matter of placing the radical change in a larger context of meaning (Mintzberg 1991) and thereby achieving acceptance of the changed situation. The life cycle model of management professor Henry Mintzberg can be helpful here: organisations form, develop, mature and decline. Career researchers Kornelia Rappe-Giesecke and Michael Giesecke 2000 put particular emphasis on how impor-

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## *What is the task profile for coaches when dealing with professional failure?*

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tant it is for counsellors to have the courage to clearly express that, for example, a certain service is simply no longer in demand because clients have changed. Years ago, for example, countless educators were “laid off” because German courses for ethnic German resettlers were no longer needed. Today, changes in the subsidies for solar energy are leading to a massive crisis in the solar industry, with thousands of jobs being cut. Service positions become redundant or financial resources are redistributed.

Rappe-Giesecke and Giesecke believe that it is crucial for advisors to adopt the attitude that destruction and development belong together. New orders are always needed, as we have learned in chaos theory, whether at the global level of cultural ecosystems or the micro level of financing highly indebted cities. They refer to Mintzberg, who proposes the distinction between the preservation of a species and the preservation of an individual. According to this, birth and death are necessary conditions for the preservation of a species. Generational change is only possible through decay or demise. They recommend a counsellor’s attitude of considering the decay of the organisation or group as a probable development. Through the development of a meta-theory, which can be described as species-oriented and ecological, new perspectives that facilitate trust in the new emerge.

### Proactivity, optimism and self-efficacy

Proactivity, optimism, self-efficacy and a sense of coherence are dispositions that are assumed to be essential for personal adaptability in a dynamic work environment. Proactivity is seen in close connection with personal responsibility and initiative. According to J. Michael Crant, "people with a high level of proactivity look for opportunities for action, show initiative to change given situations and maintain their intention for action until a change that makes sense from their point of view is achieved" (Lang von Wins & Triebel 2012, p. 26). In contrast, people with little pronounced proactivity tend to adapt passively to newly changed conditions, which generally entails reactive patterns of action.

Psychologist Martin Seligmann understands optimism as the antithesis of pessimism, which he considers a result of what he defines as learned helplessness. While pessimists "tend to generalise the loss of control and also transfer it to other situations in which they do, however, actually have opportunities to exert influence" (Lang von Wins & Triebel 2012, p. 26) and lapse into passivity hoping that a state or situation will change even without their intervention, optimists use the opportunity to look beyond given situations. They assess their own experience of previous lack of influence as insignificant for their further actions and repeatedly try to improve displeasing conditions or situations.

The construct of self-efficacy is similar. Psychologist Albert Bandura describes it as one's assessment of how well difficult situations can be handled. People with higher self-efficacy are convinced that they can successfully master demanding challenges and, as a consequence, often consciously choose ambitious goals that they then pursue persistently. On the way there, they do not let difficulties stop them. In psychology, a high level of self-efficacy is generally regarded as a sign and a prerequisite for successful adaptation.

For the sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, sense of coherence is a basic personal orientation. It expresses the extent of a comprehensive, lasting and at the same time dynamic feeling of confidence that the course of one's life is seen as structured, predictable and explainable from the interaction of factors originating in the internal and external environment (understandability) and that resources are available to meet the demands (manageability). Demands represent challenges that are worth an effort, an intervention and a commitment (meaningfulness). Increasing the sense of coherence can therefore be considered the essence of a salutogenetic perspective and is thus also the guiding principle of career disruption counselling. ■

#### Further reading:

- Antonovsky, A. (1987). *Unraveling the mystery of health. How people manage stress and stay well*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, .
- Bandura, A. C. (1977). Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, pp 191-215.
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- Lang von Wins, T. & Triebel, C. (2012). *Karriereberatung*. 2. Auflage. Berlin: Springer.
- Mintzberg, H. (1989). *Mintzberg on Management. Inside Our Strange World Of Organizations*, New York and London: Free Press/Collier Macmillan.
- Möller, H. & Prantl, N. (2006). Beratung und Coaching in Unternehmenskrisen. In: *Handbuch Psychologische Beratung*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 412-428.
- Rappe-Giesecke, K. & Giesecke, M. (2000). Werden und Vergehen von Organisationen - Die Begleitung der Auflösung von Organisationen als Aufgabe der Supervision. *Supervision*, 1, 19-22.



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