

## **When Resilience Goes...**

A talented director sees the business agenda moving away from his area. For the first time he is not at the centre of things and he is uncertain as to the purpose of his role. In response he becomes angry with his team who he judges to be failing him, an anger that only increases when they look to him to provide a sense of purpose, and he is unable to do so. In his meetings with his boss he can only focus on what he sees as her lack of concern for him, and a sense that he is abandoned. He finds it impossible to sleep as his head is filled with fears that he has lost all credibility. He withdraws from friends, as he is no longer able to play the role of cheery mate, and is fearful that letting others into his emotional state will make them withdraw from him. Eventually he collapses with what his GP diagnoses as ME but which others may call 'burnout'.

A senior academic with many years experience in one university is made redundant as a result of restructuring of programmes. Offered career coaching he can see no further than his anger at the institution that has taken away everything he values. He is ashamed at what he sees as his loss of status, and can see no point in keeping in touch with colleagues, as it only highlights his failure.

What connects the two experiences is a loss of resilience. Individuals who for many years saw themselves as able contributors have been hit by events which have left them reeling, and doubting that they have a future.

To be resilient is to have elasticity in one's responses to events. When we are resilient we can adapt to our circumstances. It is a capacity we use every day. No cereal in the cupboard, we adjust our expectations of breakfast. Collapse of our travel arrangements and we quickly reorientate in order to meet our commitments. We all have the capability of resilience, as without it we could not manage our way through daily life. At times however, our resilience gets trammelled. It may be a major life event: death, divorce, job loss. Equally, we may discover that an event we handled well in our past we deal with less well when it reoccurs.

Resilience, which has been the subject of study since the 1930's has largely focussed on why some people will face life difficulties and trauma, and emerge intact, while others will be scarred. What is noticeable in the literature is that relatively attention has been given to the loss of resilience within work.

In 1994, a Harvard Business Review article (Waterman, Waterman and Collard 1994), coined the term 'career resilience'. For them career resilient individuals "contribute skills aligned to business needs, are dedicated to continuous learning and committed to personal excellence". Implicit in this view is the idea of self reliance. This definition has shaped how the subject of resilience has been interpreted by career coaches. The focus has been on how to increase individual marketability and proactive job seeking behaviours in a less certain world. Resilience is a strategy that can be learnt. However, what this view ignores is the evidence from research (Chiaburu et al 2006), that proactive behaviour which does lead to career success is mediated by career resilience. A person lacking resilience is incapable of being a proactive agent of their career future.

What this suggests for those of us coaching on career issues is that we need to do less of the 'doing' of career and more on helping our clients to look at the aspects of the self which have been threatened by the setback, in order to help them refind their flexibility in cognition, behaviour and

emotions that enables individuals to find their own strategies for taking their career forward. Jenny Kidd of Birkbeck College has spoken of how careers work has avoided dealing with the emotion of career. In focussing on 'the know how' of getting back on track, we risk ignoring the emotions which come with setback.

Given permission to address his feelings of 'not being good enough', the director was able to understand how he had lost his resilience and what he now needed to do going forward. Addressing the lack of intimacy in his life, he was able to see that the limited picture of himself he presented to the world controlled access to him, and how intimacy grew with his willingness to share his vulnerability. Similarly, the Academic allowed to bring his shame into the open, was eventually able to disconnect the event from himself as an individual, and to see different possibilities for his future.

Career resilience has for too long been seen as protection against market vagaries, it is time to reconnect it with working with what is known about refinding resilience in other spheres of life.

### **Carole Pemberton**

#### References:

Waterman, R.H., Waterman, J.D. and Collard, B.A. (1994)

Towards a career-resilient workforce, *Harvard Business Review*, 72,4,July-August, 87-95.

Chiaburu, D.S., Baker, V.L. and Pitariu, A.H. (2006) Beyond being proactive: what (else) matters for career self management? *Career Development International*, 11,7, 619-632

## Career Coaching for Resilience Workshops

Carole Pemberton and Lindsay Wittenberg are running two open programmes on career coaching skills for resilience in 2011.

Carole is a Faculty Member of the AoEC and is the author of 'Strike a New Career Deal ' and 'Coaching to Solutions'.

May 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> Brighton

September 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> London

The two day programme is designed to address the issue of working on career resilience issues with our clients.

The programme is recognised by the Institute of Leadership and Management.

Participants have the opportunity to work towards an ILM Career Coaching for Resilience Award.

The programme is designed for those who want to add to their career coaching repertoire, and to be able to work with the issues that are coming out of an uncertain work environment.

AoEC graduates and students are offered the opportunity to attend the programme at a special discounted rate of £447.50 (plus VAT). Usual delegate rate is £600.

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