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Healthcare Industry Experts – Featured Article

Healthcare Executives in Job Transition

Q&A with Performance Psychologist Dr. Laura Canter

Dr. Laura Canter is a licensed performance psychologist working with corporate executives and elite athletes to improve their success

Q. What are your observations on people in transition?

People are nervous. This is the best way to describe the overwhelming feelings that can come someone's way as they go through transition. Some people come to me with an overwhelming sense of urgency. Others come to me with underwhelming emotions; it's hard to motivate them – that nervousness about their unknown future – can really hurt people as they start their journey.

If they are too nervous, people can get caught up in what I like to call the Activity Trap. They begin to get busy for busy sake. They create activities, set goals and appear to be busy and active, but really it's just being busy for busy sake. This is actually avoidant behavior – they avoid tackling hard issues to help them move forward. They set these goals without taking the time to see if the goals are leading them in the right direction or any direction at all.

The people who are nervous but don't show motivation are coming from a place of defeat or even sheer exhaustion. It's not that they aren't worried or don't care about their future, they've learned a sense of helplessness from the last job, the last boss, or last issues that have literally exhausted them. During our time together we work on finding that motivation, what inspires them? And we work towards building upon that inspiration – what do you like about your job? Why do you do it? We need to find that internal motivation.

Now this is key – internal motivation. It doesn't matter if they are desperate or unmotivated. We have to find out what inspires them, so they can move forward to acceptance.

Q. What do executives in transition need to work on to be successful?

As previously mentioned, I talked about intrinsic motivation. Many people forget why they are doing the job they are doing. They haven't set personal goals in years and therefore they are working as a means to an end versus working for enjoyment, intellectual wellness or because they just like to work and they love that work. It doesn't matter if you are a professional athlete or an executive – burnout can happen to anyone, anytime, any profession.

Another element of success: setting not only clear goals, but having clear and realistic expectations around those goals. In the sessions I talk about the 7 Elements of Excellence with transition:

7 Elements of Excellence

1. Confidence
2. Commitment – to yourself and to the process ahead
3. Focus – completely connected to the process
4. Mental readiness – preparation
5. Controlling distractions – overcoming setbacks
6. Passion for ongoing learning
7. Imagination in positive ways – don't forget to play and laugh

It's about finding the "Optimal Self-Confidence Zone." It's about becoming humble – great leaders are very self-confident and the reason they are confident is because they know their strengths in equal proportions to their weaknesses. They just choose to actively pursue their strengths to overcome their weaknesses. A good dose of humility never hurt anyone!

We've already talked about how distractions can happen, and if you are over/under confident you may not be fully focused. So, taking into account that there will be distractions, how will you stay focused and connected to the process when things are not as easy?

One of the ways we try to keep that focus is through preparation. "Confidence is the product of being prepared"– Jack Nicklaus. If you've done your research and put time, energy and focus into the preparation, you need to have trust in your knowledge. Confidence doesn't mean you will always be successful, but by preparing and becoming mentally tough, it gives you the mindset to face challenges despite the outcome. This alone helps you to overcome setbacks and focus on the next challenge.

People get one-dimensionally focused. When they are out of work their only goal, focus or aspiration is to find employment. But, what about the other dimensions of your life? What have you been missing out on because you've been working? What other hobbies, interests and relationships would you like to connect to during the transition? This is just as important as finding the next job.

And finally – don't forget to use that imagination. Adults laugh on average 5 to15 times a day. Kids laugh up to 200 times a day. Why do we have to stop laughing as we age? Allow yourself to have big dreams, allow yourself to play, allow yourself to laugh – this is how you get reconnected with your goals and find that intrinsic motivation to work. But, when we give up our imagination, we give up creativity, curiosity, zest and wonder! And yet, all of those strengths are linked to decreased depression and anxiety, and they help you to bounce back more successfully. Also, people who are more creative tend to be more successful and make more money – so even if you are stuck in extrinsic motivation, i.e., making more money – tapping into imagination, curiosity, creativity and zest will help you to find internal reward and turn your goal into intrinsic motivation.

Q. What seems to be the repetitive challenge going into this transition period?

People going through transition always seem to struggle with the "Number 1 Rule" of psychology and cognitive behavior therapy – Controllable vs. Uncontrollables. In theory, they get the concept, but when it comes to the application, many fall short. For example, they find it hard to adequately prepare themselves for the major ups and downs of transition. You will get the over-confident transitional person ("I'll get a job in no time, I know tons of people") or you get the under-confident transitional person ("I can't make 50 network calls a week, I don't even know 50 people"). No matter the approach, they always forget to focus on the things which they have control over. This leads them to the inevitable question: How do I maintain a constant pace during my transition?

It's hard to stay motivated all the time. It's hard to bounce back from a neutral or negative phone call (neutral phone calls are typically perceived more negative than positive) and it is even harder for highly motivated people to understand that not everyone is on their timeline. Executives in

transition seem to immediately forget what it was like when they were employed full-time. They forget that they didn't return phone calls in a timely manner (normal call back for working executives is two to four weeks). They forget that they didn't keep up networks and actively create that network safety net for times like these. So, when they are now the people making the outreach phone calls, they get very nervous, upset or angry when people don't call them back right away.

We've all heard the saying: "Change is not personal." Well, I always add an extra caveat to that statement: "change is not personal to everyone else." Of course, a transition is personal to the person experiencing it – and this can get them into trouble. When they don't get a response in a "timely manner" they see it as a referendum on them versus someone just being busy and not having the time to reach out for two to four weeks, just like they used to do when employed.

Q. What are your observations of those who seem to be most successful in transition versus those who seem to struggle with the journey?

The most successful people in transition come to a place of acceptance before moving on to the next phase of their life and career. I've spoken to numerous people that still speak poorly of "the last transition." After a while, that negative reflection of events eats into current and future events. It clouds their perspective on their performance. People who actively look inward reflect on what happened, what could have been done better (controllable or uncontrollable) and how they wish to make positive changes for the future, have a better bounce back. The trick is to evaluate the Good, the Better and the How with as little emotional baggage as possible,... which is easier said than done. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote in *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*),...."That is the hardest thing of all. It is much harder to judge yourself than to judge others. If you succeed in judging yourself, it's because you're truly a wise man."

Part of the work I do with clients is to help them judge their performance without personalization, overgeneralization or magnifications, and without making arbitrary inferences… which means, take the emotion out of the event!

People who can successfully do this task are more successful in transition! Finally, remember – everyone transitions at their own pace, their own time and in their own way. There is not a cookie cutter approach to transition. There are tasks we can all work on, but each person needs to work through their own cognitions and emotions to come to a place of acceptance before they can move on to the next part of their journey.

About the author:

Dr. Laura Canter is a Licensed Performance Psychologist. She has worked with professional and elite amateur athletes for ten years as an Exercise Physiologist and Athletic Development Trainer in a variety of sports, including in the NFL, MLB, Tennis and other fields. After completing her graduate studies at the University of Queensland in Brisbane Australia, Laura switched her focus to concentrate on the mental aspects of performance, sharing her philosophy with business executives, high performance athletes and other top performers. For more information, contact Laura at llcanter1@gmail.com.
