

KICK-START

Stuck in a career rut? Learn how to get back on the open road

By Lori Pizzani

Are you feeling stuck in your current career path? Constantly facing seemingly insurmountable job obstacles you no longer desire to tackle? Feeling trapped in a dead-end position or just plain bored to tears? You are definitely not alone. If you've been pushing hard but your career is stuck in neutral, it's probably time for a change.

What's the best way to figure out what new path to pursue and how best to advance your career? Career experts can detail several ways to plot your individualized new course, but the best way to figure out where you should be heading is to first stop and assess where you are right now.

"To determine if you have outgrown your current job, ask yourself these key questions," says Elene Cafasso, founder and president of Enerpace, an executive-coaching firm in Chicago. "Am I bored daily at work? Do I dread Mondays? When was the last time I learned something new at work? How much company investment is there in my training and development? What's my career path here? Is there anywhere left for me to go in my department/division? Am I working with the same people on the same projects as I did 12 months ago? Are there any signs of that changing in the foreseeable future?"

Although you may enjoy serving in a role that offers predictable tasks, if you feel bored and "[as] if you could do your job with your eyes



Illustration by Timothy Cook

closed, it may be time for you to look for a new challenge,” says Cheryl E. Palmer, a certified executive coach and founder and president of Call to Career, a career-coaching firm in the Washington, DC area. Similarly, if you have been pigeonholed into one area of responsibility and firmly believe you can do more, it’s time to free yourself from your career rut. “It’s easy for human beings to stick with the familiar. But if you don’t take the risk of looking for something new, you can easily become overcome with inertia and miss out on an exciting career,” counsels Palmer. She notes that she encounters people nearing the end of their careers who express deep regret because they did not take advantage of opportunities when they were available. “It’s good to try new things and see where they will lead you.”

MOVING IN MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS

Palmer suggests that before jumping ship to work for an entirely new company, one should consider whether changes can be made within your existing company. Explore lateral moves. “A lateral move can be an opportunity, not a liability, particularly if it is strategically done. A lateral move can open new doors if it allows for a person to learn new skills and transfer to an environment that offers more opportunity,” Palmer says. Alternately, she suggests considering a downward move. “It is sometimes necessary to go backward before you can move forward again,” she says. Some professionals, particularly since the Global Economic Crisis, have taken lower-level jobs simply to remain employed. “Although some find it ego-bruising to take a step backward in terms of responsibility, it may be the best option.” Palmer adds that a wise person once said, “If you’re on the edge of a cliff, a step backward can be a very positive thing.” Stepping into a lesser role may also allow you to use your expertise to mentor less experienced employees, a role many experienced professionals find gratifying.

You may want to stay with your company but know that you need to pursue other avenues that essentially circumvent the traditional steps to climbing the corporate ladder. That’s perfectly fine, says Suz O’Donnell, founder and CEO of Thrivatize, an executive-coaching and consulting firm in Park Ridge, Illinois. O’Donnell offers tips for charting unconventional career paths.

“Don’t wait for your boss,” she says. “Unfortunately, not every boss has the vision to see which team members are ready and able to handle more responsibility. Some bosses just manage their current team, while other bosses really care about your development and are great advocates to getting you promoted.” The idea is to make a move if your boss isn’t promoting you and find other people within your organization who will foster your promotion, perhaps by letting you work for them. In addition, O’Donnell notes, in order to be recognized—and promoted—you need to not only do your job well but also stand out from the crowd. “If you are an excellent employee who is also a great people

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leader, or you constantly take on difficult projects and turn them into great success stories,” that could definitely make you stand out.

Going beyond the numbers is also an important concept to embrace, O’Donnell says. “Crunching numbers, consistent accuracy, and critical thinking are all job requirements that got you to where you are now. These won’t disappear, but they will also not necessarily elevate you to the next level.” O’Donnell offers two paths for consideration. “You need to either demonstrate your ability to lead other people in an efficient, proactive way or be the kind of person who creates new client relationships and builds existing ones.”

If you are vying for a promotion at your current company, it’s important to “consider changing the direction of your career and making intentional thoughts and actions specific

Every Journey Begins with Six Single Steps

Lori Scherwin of Strategize That suggests these steps for changing your career trajectory:

CREATE A FIVE-YEAR CAREER PLAN. Set goals and milestones and determine next steps. Be flexible and modify your plans as life unfolds.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT. If your dream job turns out to be a nightmare, be ready to adjust. Focus on your strengths, what comes effortlessly, and what you absolutely love (and hate).

UNDERSTAND THE LANDSCAPE. Don’t box yourself into one role or career path. Consider other ways to leverage your skillset.

CHALLENGE YOUR THINKING. Are you taking the easy road, or are you stretching? Determine what really matters to you, including tangibles such as your commute, benefits, traveling, and work-life balance, as well as intangibles such as what you will contribute. Do you want to coast, or do you want to grow and learn?

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Network with multiple people at a potential new company. The company and its people matter as much as your role in it. Fit is key.

HAVE A REALISTIC TIME FRAME. Decide what new training or skills you will need and what steps to take to achieve them.

to getting promoted,” says Rhonda Y. Williams, executive life strategist and founder of Dream Life Global Enterprise in Kissimmee, Florida. She suggests these tips: Identify the specific promotion/role you are seeking; analyze the qualifications for that role, both formal and informal; conduct a candid self-analysis to determine if you possess any behaviors or obstacles that may hinder your promotion; establish a mentor; and elicit management support for your vision.

DEFINING YOUR PASSION

“One of the most common reasons successful professionals get stuck in their careers is that they don’t know what it is they want,” suggests Lori Scherwin, a certified professional coach and founder of Strategize That in New York City. “When you can clearly articulate what you want, it becomes much easier to create actionable steps to get you there.”

Once you become clear on what you really want next, Scherwin says, “Your ideal career will fall at the intersection of what you are good at, what you enjoy doing, and what someone will pay you for.” She adds, “Keep a positive attitude, even if you are loathing your current role, and remember that you have options, whether it’s staying, modifying, or changing your job altogether. Stay focused on being excited about finding the solution rather than [obsessing over] the problem.”

How can you identify what your ideal career looks like? Do some deep soul-searching, determine what it is you don’t like, and then start mapping out a game plan, Scherwin suggests. Remember to search for and recognize your own passion triggers and rekindle what inspires you.

“Are you passionate about what you do?” asks Steve Farber, a leadership and management expert, author, and founder of the Extreme Leadership Institute of San Diego, California. “By its nature, true passion is energizing, and you know the difference between passion and drudgery. Passion for your mission, product, service, team, or customers is what makes you jump out of bed in the morning. When your job is nothing more than a chore, you fall out of bed and drag yourself through the day.”

SLAY YOUR DEMONS

As you consider pursuing new challenges, fresh responsibilities, and making a career shift, Dawn Mitchell, a career-transition consultant and the founder and chief executive adviser of the Corporate Couch in Houston, Texas, suggests that any change must start with adjusting your mindset and freeing yourself from old self-perceptions. “You are not held hostage to a career decision that you made for your professional life years ago. Realize that today, whatever your age, you have the power to make a career decision altering the direction of your life.” You should “give

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yourself permission to make a change,” as you are not the same person you were when your career began.

In addition, she notes that old demons must be appropriately slayed when fear inevitably rears its head and convinces you that you simply can’t handle a new job or that you are the only person facing this career dilemma.

Mitchell also points out the importance of becoming a problem solver before looking for new opportunities or hoping they find you. She suggests creating a list of the top three problems you are most passionate about solving right now. “This is a major key to where your inner compass may be leading you next in your professional career. It will also help you clarify which opportunities would be a potential good fit and which you have outgrown,” she adds.

But to truly overcome barriers in your career, you need to conduct some candid introspection and determine what workplace characteristics you really desire (collaborative or competitive culture, fast- or slow-paced), what role you want to have (advocate, negotiator, persuader, implementer, visionary, or mediator), what you will bring to your role to add value (increase sales, build culture, decrease waste/inefficiency), and what your priorities are for the company or job you want to work for, notes Elizabeth B. Crook, a career and professional coach, business strategist, author, and founder and CEO of Orchard Advisors in Nashville, Tennessee.

“First, you must get unstuck in your own head,” she says. “Too many times, we focus on a title or a company that we believe will give us what we think we want.”

“If you love your work but hate your job/boss/company, it’s time to look elsewhere,” suggests Dawn Rasmussen, a Portland, Oregon-based author and president of Pathfinder

Writing and Career Services. “With so much turbulence in the financial sector, change seems to be the constant.”

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KEEP GOING

“A New Mission,” *CFA Institute Magazine* (September 2016) [www.cfapubs.org]

CFA Institute Career Guide: <http://cfa.is/2nt0lzf>