You Don’t Have to Stay in a Rut: Some Ways to Set Yourself Free

The most insidious career traps we face are those we have set for ourselves, according to psychiatrist and business consultant Mark Goulston. But, he says, we don’t have to remain stuck in them. Self-awareness and a focused action plan can set us free.

Goulston is an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA and co-author of “Get Out of Your Own Way: Overcoming Self-Defeating Behavior” (Perigee Books, 1996). He advises such clients as IBM, GE, Kodak, Federal Express, Bank of America, Merrill Lynch and the FBI on improving business relationships.

In an interview, Goulston discussed why he believes more and more people are feeling trapped and how they might be able to move forward again.

Question: What are some of the most common career traps your clients face?

Answer: One of the most common traps involves a resistance to change. More people are ready for change than are ready to change. They remain in safe but unsatisfying careers rather than take a chance on something new but risky. Or they remain miserable in jobs that provide a secure income and sell out their heart’s desires. Many physicians, for example, who feel beaten down by managed care will not think of changing their careers because they don’t want to disturb their “relatively” secure income.

The second most common career trap is people know much more clearly how they want to feel--happy instead of unhappy, rich instead of poor, popular instead of unpopular--than what they need to change in their life that will result in those good feelings. This explains the explosive growth of the coaching profession geared toward professionals. Coaching helps people to focus on their dreams--a plan for turning them into reality, and accountability so they don’t become distracted.

Q: Why do you think the career traps you mentioned are so widespread now?

A: The media makes everyman feel as if he or she is missing out in life and that everyone has more than them. Generation Xers want things quicker, because they grew up having more, and they lack patience or the concern about building a nest egg. Baby boomers are having trouble because they can’t accept that the party is over for them and it’s now the younger generation’s turn. Without a clear path for aging more gracefully and gratefully, baby boomers are holding on for dear life to whatever power they have left.

Q: Do people tend to feel more stuck at certain phases in their lives--for example, midlife? If so, why?

A: Few things make you feel as risk averse as having children. As soon as they have children, most people become hesitant to take a chance on changing. Then, as people reach midlife and beyond, they develop an increasing, and erroneous, belief that they can’t learn new things.

In fact, the main reason individuals resist change is a fear that they can’t learn those new ways that are necessary to make and sustain change. As a result they look for reasons to justify not having to learn and they sabotage innovation in their companies, careers and life.
Q: What is the No. 1 cause of “learned helplessness” in today’s worker?

A: Supervisors, supervisors, supervisors. When a supervisor is unclear (or keeps changing his or her mind) in what he [or she] wants from a worker, this creates confusion. When a supervisor expects workers to do what they’re not trained to do, this creates fear. When a supervisor is harsh and condescending, this creates resentment. When a supervisor lies, this creates distrust. Show me a work climate that engenders confusion, fear, resentment and distrust, and I’ll show you a work force that feels trapped and is filled with learned helplessness.

Q: Are we seeing more learned helplessness in today’s economic landscape than in recent decades?

A: It’s about the same because most workers hope for, but don’t expect, companies to be loyal to them (nor do companies expect workers to be loyal in return). Training is down because workers are constantly moving from company to company, and companies don’t want to invest in training people who may leave after a short time.

Surprises in the workplace tend to be more the rule than the exception. In the past, such a climate may have led to learned helplessness, but younger workers have acclimated better to this chaotic corporate scene than have baby boomers.

Q: Why do some people seem able to leap over obstacles, while others remain flattened by them?

A: Some people are naturally optimistic. Optimists see the good in the bad. Pessimists see the bad in the good. But a good attitude is not the only explanation for why some people make it through career roadblocks while others don’t. You’re probably familiar with the phrase, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” The reverse, “Where there’s a way, there’s a will” is more often true. People who leap over obstacles have a clearer picture of the steps they need to take to make it to the other side of adversity.

Q: If a person is unemployed or languishing in a dead-end job, what can he or she do to keep up morale?

A: Stay in touch with peers who can listen and lend support. Resist the temptation to isolate yourself. When you’re alone in your mind, you’re in enemy territory. Keep up with reading on current trends. Contact old friends as well as old employers for help in finding jobs. Take courses or learn new skills to reinforce that you are still able to learn new things. Exercise! Do something to help the downtrodden in the world. This will help you feel the personal triumph of rising above your self-preoccupation.

Q: Some motivational speakers and authors advocate positive self-talk as a tool for breaking through seemingly impossible obstacles. But when does positive self-talk become self-delusion?

A: The difference between positive self-talk and self-delusion is the difference between being realistic and being reasonable. It’s reasonable to believe that you can do whatever you put your mind to (in other words, it appears to make sense). But without a plan for making it happen, it is not realistic and, therefore, not likely to happen.

Assess your goals to determine whether they are merely reasonable or realistic and doable. The best way to distinguish whether you’re being truthful or kidding yourself is your track record. The way you deal with adversity in your present is likely to be similar to how you dealt with it in the past.

Don’t despair if your track record leaves something to be desired. You don’t have to be locked out of a good future if you’re honest with yourself. Follow what’s worked. Drop what hasn’t. Assess your strengths and grow them. Evaluate your weaknesses and correct them.
Q: Do internal obstacles--such as “doomsday thinking” and passivity--have the same effect on a person as do external obstacles such as downsizing and discrimination?

A: Warren Buffett has on numerous occasions expressed that the reason people don’t succeed is not because of the world holding them back but because they get in their own way. Once fear slides into anxiety, disappointment descends into depression, or anger erupts into self-righteous rage, there is little a person can do to prevent a major assault on his or her career.

The problem in an increasingly complex and fast-moving society is that people have lost the ability to comfort or center themselves to prevent minor upsets in their outside world from escalating into major explosions in their internal world.

Q: How can people who are “fuzzy thinkers”--who get overwhelmed by work problems, then can’t think clearly--develop healthier strategies for dealing with adversity?

A: Have a clear plan that you practice ahead of time. That way it’ll be second nature and easier to use under pressure. The best way to devise an effective plan is to think back to adverse situations that you handled poorly. Ask yourself, “If I had that to do over, what would I would do differently?” Then write it down, and check out your plan with a respected friend if they think it will work.

If you can’t remember without getting “fuzzy,” then the next time you screw up dealing with an adverse situation, instead of blaming the other person or beating up on yourself, write down what you’d do differently to yield a better result.

Q: When should a person seek outside professional help--for example, from a career counselor, coach or even a therapist--to assist in overcoming work obstacles?

A: When a person has exhausted all the resources (including some wonderful books such as “What Color is Your Parachute?” by Richard Nelson Bolles) and people in his life who can provide him with objective input on abilities, talents, likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, he might consider seeking the help of a career counselor or coach. One needn’t feel ashamed or inadequate to not be able to do this for himself. Even superstars like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods need a coach.

Q: What has been your greatest career obstacle, and how did you solve it?

A: I am a psychiatrist who is more psychotherapist than psychopharmacologist. As the market for psychiatrists practicing psychotherapy has shriveled up, I have needed to venture out from the relative safe and risk-averse domain of medicine into the dog-eat-dog world of business. I have solved it by pushing myself to become more involved in networking in the business world in spite of the fact that I am a charter member of the “dread going, but glad I went” club for the painfully shy.