

Behavioral Changes: What others see in us that we may miss in ourselves

Although you may be enduring the stress and emotional fallout from extended unemployment, I would bet that your spouses, significant others, family and friends are suffering some collateral damage from it as well, and you may be unaware of it. Stress caused by checkbook pressure can affect the strongest marriages and break those that were previously in trouble. To borrow from Allen Greenspan, just a few years ago, we were all in an “irrationally exuberant” economy. Business was vibrant; job offers were coming in over the phone, and investment portfolios were mushrooming; all creating a wealth effect that was unmistakable. Many people were lured into buying bigger homes. They bought or leased expensive cars and second homes, they took more frequent and expensive vacations ran up credit card debt at the mall and spent lavishly; because they were either paper millionaires or seemingly headed there. Indeed, the owner of a local marina and boatyard once told me that if he plotted his sales on a graph, they would closely follow the stock market’s gyrations. If the market had a strong run on a Friday, he was almost assured of selling a boat that weekend. I have no scientific evidence or proof, but my observations lead me to believe that when economic times are good and we can spend freely, our personal problems seem to diminish. They also tend appear more complex and stressful when money is tight, as it is for many at this time.

In my previous newsletter, I discussed that some of our members are leaving their IT careers to “pursue other opportunities”, as the Wall Street Journal always comments euphemistically. I would not consider working for minimum wage in Wal Mart or Home Depot an opportunity, but would characterize it as necessary for personal survival. Your responses to my last newsletter were very supportive, although one member felt that it had a pessimistic tone. He had landed an excellent position last year and felt that everyone should hold out for the right job rather than compromise by taking a lesser position or by abandoning their career for some other line of work. I submit that each of us has unique financial and personal circumstances, as well as tolerance levels to these challenges. Not all of us are allowed to make career decisions in a vacuum, without assessing the impact they may have on those people who matter most to us. A job offer that we might have spurned in the past is now a welcome lifeline.

One member recently contacted me because their spouse asked them to establish a deadline, by which time they would hold a job, any job. The member felt considerable pressure from this. They have been out of work for about a year and have suffered the same market difficulties as everyone else. However, they were not sure whether they wanted to take on a minimum wage job that would be unrewarding and a distraction from their serious search for a career opportunity. So too, they were not ready to give up the nights and weekends required by such employment. My reply contained the following thoughts:

- Some of our members are working part time jobs to make ends meet. I have no idea how many are doing so.
- The spouse may not have a clear picture of the present job market and needs to be assured that the job seeker is doing everything humanly possible to secure a new position.

- The spouse may have a very clear understanding of the job market and economy and is therefore frightened because family finances are in poor shape.
- The spouse may not be aware that many professionals are in this same predicament and that the jobseeker is not “damaged goods”, nor are they facing this alone.
- No matter how strong a relationship people share, they need time apart. Being unemployed and stressed over finances along with loss of career and in each other’s face 24/7 can be explosive. On a related but more humorous note, I once heard a story about a man who had retired and was home all the time. One day, his wife made him leave the house, pleading with him to find something to do. She said, “I married you for better or worse, but not for lunch”.

Whether you are married or in some other committed relationship, the following ideas may be of value:

- Have a frank discussion with your spouse or partner about your financial picture, where your head is at professionally and how you see things playing out.
- Depending upon your circumstances, you may have to discuss with them a "Plan B", which could include your taking on part-time work or an alternative career. This must lay out all the positives and negatives, including income, benefits, and the fact that you may be working nights and weekends, meaning a greater burden on your spouse, if you have kids.
- You must address your own ego and sense of pride. As some members have said to me, I played by the rules, have a college degree(s), worked hard and worked for excellent companies and now I can't find a job. What's wrong here? It's very hard on anyone intellectually and emotionally to go from being a Vice President to being a minimum wage employee in retail, or to some other non-executive, low-paying position. On the other hand, if your family needs food and shelter, you have to do whatever is necessary. After you and your partner arrive at a consensus about finances, your career and its alternatives, rather than draw a line in the sand, at which point you apply to Home Depot; you may want to set up a time in the future, say 60 or 90 days out, when both of you will have this discussion again. This is to see if you are getting closer to the job you want, assess the market and decide whether you must consider alternatives. You also need to keep discussing things with each other in the meantime. Unplanned financial emergencies should be considered.
- Your partner needs to know that you understand their concerns and you also need to know that they understand yours. Many people are facing complex emotions driven by a sense of failure, hopelessness, along with fear of the future, guilt and helplessness. Our present political and economic conditions exacerbate this stress. This is especially challenging because some people feel an increase in stress and depression when conversations emphasize negatives.
- Consider joining a support group. I was recently informed of the local (NY-CT) existence such a group for the spouses and partners of unemployed executives. This may be an excellent way for your partner to develop empathy for your situation, because it is created sharing common experiences with others. When we face some of life’s most burdensome problems, our loved

ones face them with us, whether we want them to or not. Some local TENG members reported that this local support group was providing a very valuable service.

- The people who matter most in your life are counting on you for emotional support, guidance, leadership and strength. Many who face the personal challenge of extended unemployment tend to turn inward and become less communicative with their loved ones. They don't want to show their emotions and feelings, since they feel this is displaying a weakness. I used to think that this was more of a male thing, because men are socialized to be the hunter and provider. When they fail to bring home the bacon, their egos are wounded. Many men will draw from their loved ones at such a time. In doing so, they isolate loved ones who want to help them. I am not slighting our female members. Many of them will outwardly treat their transitional experience as an adventure and a journey, which it should be, but more than few of them have quietly shared that time spent alone waiting for a phone call requesting an interview is filled with panic, financial worry and despair, just as it is for their male counterparts. When it comes to stress and worry, there is no glass ceiling, but plenty of equal opportunity. It's hard for either gender to be upbeat for loved ones when they've been out of work for an extended period. On the other hand, they have to participate in the lives of those around them and this is not always easy.
- Set aside some time to help others. Charities, schools, community outreach organizations, religious groups and soup kitchens are always seeking people to volunteer their time and talent. Helping them can be very beneficial on many levels. You derive satisfaction from helping others, you focus outward rather than inward and you get needed time away from your loved ones. Most of all, you will find that you don't have to search very far for very long to find someone confronting problems that appear worse than your own.

The best that anyone can do is to try to communicate feelings and emotions to loved ones. If this is not possible, or if it causes undue stress for the spouse or partner, perhaps professional counseling would be beneficial. If due to finances, that is not an alternative, speaking with a member of the clergy, a trusted and valued friend, colleague or former mentor may suffice. Suffering alone is stressful and may cause us to hurt those whom we love the most.

© Copyright, April 2003, Edward J. Pospesil

Ed Pospesil
Chairman
Technology Executives Network Group SM

Vice President
Bruner Consulting Associates, Inc.
33 Elizabeth Street, 3rd Floor
Derby, CT 06418
epospesil@brunerconsulting.com
www.brunerconsulting.com
Phone: 866-566-2224 / 203-732-7084
Fax: 203-732-9033

This e-mail and any attachment contain information, which is private and confidential and is intended for the addressee only. If you are not an addressee, you are not authorized to read, copy or use the e-mail or any attachment. If you have received this e-mail in error, please notify the sender by return e-mail and then destroy it. Thank you.