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Hellman's Law

The Art of being more rational and less emotional

By Christopher M. Palatucci, PhD

When I was having some difficulty in a challenging course in college, a friend was coaching me through my stress by reminding me to be more rational and less emotional. He quoted what he referred to as Hellman's Law. Not to date myself, but at the time, mayonnaise came in glass jars and the lids were metal, in contrast to today's completely plastic container. To paraphrase the advice printed on the top of every one of those metal lids of Hellman's mayonnaise: "keep cool; do not freeze." Cute, but it turned out to be great advice, and a rule that I've reminded myself to follow whenever I've been faced with challenging situations.

One can find oneself unemployed for a variety of reasons. Even veteran senior managers, key executives, chiefs and presidents can find themselves dusting off their résumés unexpectedly. Companies restructure, get acquired, drop development programs, or have products fail. For any number of reasons outside one's control, one can become a candidate again with or without warning, and when it happens, it's important to remember Hellman's Law: "keep cool; do not freeze."

So what do you do when it happens to you? Here are six things you should do to help you keep your head when you find yourself "on the market"

Be prepared

The Boy Scouts have it right, and the first piece of advice happens now. Right now. As soon as you finish reading this, review your résumé. Is it up to date? Is it readable? Does it capture the essence of you? Not the list of what you can do and have done, but you. Why an employer would be crazy not to hire you. Take a step back from the document and think of your skills, not just the lists of responsibilities and accomplishments.

Too often, people confuse features and benefits. If your résumé is a list of your accomplishments (features), you are leaving it to the reader to conclude why those accomplishments are of any interest to him (why are they benefits?). If you are a part of a team, what skills distinguish you from your colleagues? Make sure your résumé is current, accurate and leaves no ambiguity as to why all items on it would be of value to a potential employer. Remember: that document is often the first exposure that you will have to a search executive or potential employer, and they will be creating their impression of you from it. Now take out a sticky note and write 'résumé' on it and stick it on your monitor so you don't forget to review it. I'm not kidding.

Know your friends

Keep a list of ten people who will give you a good recommendation. And not just your golfing buddies. Employers want honest evaluations, not candy coating. Your list should be of people who will provide a potential employer with an accurate evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses – and everyone has

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weaknesses. But that's not to say you need to have people on your list who are unknowns or who have some issue with you. You can be an honest advocate for yourself without stabbing yourself in the back.

Of course, it's often difficult to use your fellow employees or managers as references when you're employed, but think of it as one of the many benefits of being "on the beach." Your recently former colleagues are excellent references, and if you don't provide them, don't think your future employer won't try to find them and get some input from them. Employers will feel much less reticent about seeking the opinions of your former colleagues if you're no longer employed than they would if you were still in that position. It's another reason why you shouldn't burn bridges.

Follow Hellman's Law

Keep cool; do not freeze. You may have been completely blindsided or you could have seen the writing on the wall for months. In any case, do not panic. Take a deep breath, take a few days off, and clear your mind. True, you'll need to face the reality that unless you're directly related to Bill Gates, you need to find employment, but that doesn't mean you should move into panic mode. It can be hard to keep your head, but you need to constantly remind yourself that you are a skilled executive, you have desirable attributes, you will get through this, and you will find another opportunity. Panic comes through in your expressions, body language, choice of words and attitude. Search executives and potential employers can smell it, and it smells like someone who is desperate to take the first thing that comes along. Employers want someone who is in it for the long haul, not just until a better offer comes along. Find your support network and take advantage of it, but whatever you do, keep cool; do not freeze. And don't forget to take advantage of your newfound time.

The worst thing you can do is to land another position and look back at the time you were out and say 'gee, too bad I didn't...' If you're like most accomplished managers, you've probably missed a few of your kids' soccer games. Make the most of your time off.

You're not out of a job; you have a new one

Don't fall into the trap of sitting by the phone and expecting that recruiters will call you. They didn't get the memo. It's up to you to devote the same effort you put forth at work to your search. Your search is now your job. There are lots of things you can do. Regardless of your industry, there are many internet sources for identifying leads. I don't recommend sites like hotjobs or monster for senior executives. I'm not aware of any reputable employer who is likely to fill a senior leadership position from the web. Nonetheless, these places can remind you of potential employers, indirect competitors (you are probably precluded from employment with a direct competitor as part of an agreement you likely had with your former employer) or trade organizations, all of which can be great resources. It's also useful for you to see what the compensation market looks like so you can set realistic expectations for yourself. Don't forget to open your eyes. With your refreshed résumé (which highlights your skills as opposed to your list of accomplishments), you may be able to see opportunities that you would not have considered had you been sitting at your old desk thinking that your next move was to do the same thing but with a more impressive title. Just like your old job, set goals, deadlines, keep notes, do your homework on prospects, write out a plan. It helps to write out what you liked about your old job, what

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you didn't, what you're seeking in your next gig, the conditions under which you would relocate, etc. You got things done at your old job; now just make it happen with your search.

Network

Make a list of 25 people you know in the industry who could be resources. They may not be potential employers, but they could point you in the right direction. You know many more than 25 people, so making this list shouldn't be hard. Make it a point to call or meet everyone on the list. People will be happy to help to the extent they can; these are your colleagues. You'll need to take a lot of swings before you get a home run.

Getting out there and networking is the best way to get up to bat. Without that, you have no chance of even getting a single. Meet people in a professional manner – remember: this is now your job. You may be meeting informally for coffee or lunch, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't take the meeting seriously. Networking doesn't mean having lovely lunches or coffee just for kicks. There should be a purpose for each of your meetings. Take notes and follow up. You may consciously choose to meet with someone who is unlikely to provide a lead for a number of reasons – to keep the dialogue open with him or her, to assess his or her take on the industry, etc. – but make that a deliberate decision; don't just meet to have another lunch. When you get near the end of the list, make another one. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Remember: things happen for a reason

It can be frustrating, illogical, difficult and painful, but you will find another opportunity and it will be the right one. When you're one of the final two candidates and you don't get the position, it can be deflating. All it means is that you weren't right for that opportunity. The employer knew it and you probably did, too.

Worse than being on the market is being in the wrong position. You *will* find another opportunity; after all, you've now got a killer résumé, a great list of solid references, you exude confidence, you are professional, and you are interacting with industry leaders and colleagues. When you find the right opportunity, you and your employer will know it, and it will be right for both of you. Don't lose faith, maintain a professional attitude, take advantage of your time, make it a job, network, network, network, and above all, keep cool; do not freeze.

About the Author

Chris Palatucci, PhD, is the founding Partner of Palatucci Executive Search, LLC (PES), a rapidly growing boutique retained executive search firm focused on the life sciences and bio-related cleantech industries. Prior to founding PES, Chris was recruited to build the life sciences practice at Polachi, a leading retained executive search firm. He has successfully completed senior searches for companies ranging from venture-backed startups to major multinationals.

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Dr. Palatucci has over 15 years experience in the life sciences, with demonstrated success in business development, marketing, operations, sales and government affairs. Previously, Chris served as senior director, business development and licensing at Interleukin Genetics, Inc., director of business development at Athena Diagnostics, Inc. and at Kendall Strategies, Dr. Palatucci conducted strategic and financial analysis on a wide range of therapeutic and other products in multiple disease areas.

He is invited frequently to speak at both the local and national levels on topics ranging from the genetics of renal disease to public policy issues related to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries.

Dr. Palatucci received his undergraduate degree (Biology and Computer Science) from the University of Rochester and his Ph.D. (Neuroscience) from Clark University, where his research was the first demonstration of behavioral improvement following brain injury using a novel glial-derived molecule. He also conducted pre- and post-doctoral research on the basic neurobiology of the vertebrate olfactory system at the Worcester Foundation for Biomedical Research.