

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

I work in advertising, and I wonder if you can help me. My boss is a great guy, but he is always on the verge of getting fired. I'm not worried about myself. I'm an art director, and I work for several people here. If he gets fired, I'll still have a job. But I am worried about him. He seems so self destructive.

He's very competitive. He likes confrontation, and he's never happy unless he's going all out for his ideas. I admire him for that, but it leaves him with very little good will around the office. So when he needs a little sympathy or consideration, it's just not there. I mean, I think the guy is brilliant. But I've heard others say they wouldn't pour water on him if he was on fire. That's not exactly what they said, but I think you get the picture.

His trophy wife is divorcing him, and she's really turning this into a tabloid divorce. She shows up at clubs and restaurants when she knows he's going to be there, and she's hanging on the arm of her latest Boy Toy or some GQ-good-looking Wall Street type. The whole thing is just tacky. It's awful for him.

So his performance is just not crisp. All day long he talks about her, what she's done lately, and the latest legal tactic her lawyer has dreamed up. He's missed a couple of meetings, and that just isn't done at our agency. Just this week he was supposed to present his ideas on an account, and he wasn't ready. In our field, you don't get a lot of second chances.

How can I help "Robbie" help himself, before he crashes entirely?

Robbie's Fan Club of One

Dear Fan Club of One:

Robbie is in real trouble, from what you have recounted. All critical employees who go through a divorce are in real trouble. If the marriage was any deeper than a wading pool, he's in danger of drowning.

You clearly care about Robbie, although it is not entirely clear why. You wouldn't have anything to do with this divorce, would you? Let's call you an "interested friend."

In any case, "IF," if Robbie is deluding himself into believing that his behavior is going unnoticed, you might just have to tell him it just isn't so. This type of intervention is what a best friend is for. It's a required duty, even if unpleasant.

Here's the biggest problem: Being the bearer of this type of bad news can cost you plenty. If Robbie loves his denial more than he loves you, you could find yourself in big trouble fast. That's a risk for you to calculate.

Now let's address Robbie's problems. Many employers have what are called employee assistance programs, or EAPs. These are designed to help valuable employees survive a rough patch, such as a divorce or a substance-abuse crisis.

If your agency has no EAP, then Robbie needs to seek outside therapy ASAP. If he has some kind of old fashioned phobia to psychotherapy or executive coaching, perhaps you need to paint a picture of how much time he'll have to worry about his divorce while he is unemployed. That's what's next for him if he doesn't do something soon.

Even a vacation might give Robbie a chance to reassess his priorities. The norm in advertising is to take short vacations, but he could use at least a couple of weeks to decide if he wants to keep his job, or not.

Finally, this is a lesson for everybody: Being nice to people at work is like money in the bank. You never know when you'll make an egregious gaffe, or fail at a critical assignment or, for that matter, get a divorce. If you have good will at work, people will help you get through it. Then you won't be the focus of a fan club of one or, heaven forfend, a fan club with no members at all.

***** SIDEBAR *****

Career Tip of the Month

Some Employees Are Too Valuable to Fire

Ways to Save an Employee:

1. Assign an executive coach to help the employee improve.
2. Bring in an organization development consultant.
3. Refer the employee to EAP.
4. Send them to rehab, if that's the problem.
5. Set clear expectations, preferably in writing.
6. Be extremely consistent re acceptable behavior.
7. Warn the employee verbally, with H.R. officer present.
8. Reprimand the employee in writing.

If all this doesn't work, go ahead and fire them.

***** END SIDEBAR *****

Question #2: [Note to Ed.: this is the second half of the article you cut in two, and I added the above material to make a new article.]

Dear Guru Don:

I feel that I'm going through a career crisis. I have bachelor's degree in accounting. Right after college I worked for two years as an accountant then six as an auditor. Right after I passed my CPA exam, I got laid off.

This layoff impacted my self-esteem and career path. I decided to go for a certificate in programming, and then found a job as a programmer analyst. I've been in the same position for the past ten years with no advancement. I'm 42 and don't have a passion for programming anymore. I want to go back to accounting because:

1. I am burned out on learning so many programming languages and updates.
2. The outsourcing of IT jobs makes my future look somewhat bleak.
3. Most programming jobs are contracting instead of full time.

Is it impossible to go back to accounting? I haven't been in the market for the past 10 years, but I'd really like to look for an accounting job. Is this a reasonable goal? What should I do?

Sign me,

Maria in Cubicle 12-G

Dear Maria:

Go for it! Accounting is waiting for you, but you'll have to use a little strategy to get there. For one thing, if you've skipped ten years of continuing education, you'll probably have to retake your CPA exams, but maybe not right away. First you have to break out of programming and back into the accounting arena.

There is a career management concept called "bouncing," and that is what you must do. Think of using a Pogo stick to advance your career. Instead of plodding along, you need to bounce along, perhaps starting as a bookkeeper, then returning to public accounting as a clerk, then passing your CPA exams again, and then serving as a CPA. The key is that you may need to switch employers several times in order to get where you belong. Why? People who see you as a bookkeeping clerk are never going to see you as a certified accountant. And you can't afford to get stuck again for another ten years! This is the same technique used by mothers returning to the workforce after childcare, and prisoners released after serving their debts to society (which makes for an odd juxtaposition).

To break into bookkeeping, or some other non-CPA form of financial services, you'll need to bypass the whole applying-for-a-posted-opening type of job search. You need to learn how to network your way into an opportunity, which will be covered in greater detail in next month's column (so you'll have to fly USAirways again soon!). See you next month!

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.