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# Learning from Adversity: Advice from Library Leaders

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## Learning from Adversity: Advice from Library Leaders

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### Abstract:

*Throughout our career trajectory, many of us have encountered unexpected turbulence and unwelcome setbacks. Hardship can derail one's career plan. It can trigger a ripple of undesirable effects, such as anxiety, anger, depression, burnout, and self-doubt. This research surveyed library leaders and managers on how they overcame adverse experiences, moved beyond negative feelings, and contributed on a successful career. In total, the 12 participants told 14 stories of hardship experiences with 41 lessons learned. "Dealing with personnel issues" was the most reported hardship, followed by "reorganization / downsizing," and "career setback." "Coping with events beyond your control" and "learning about oneself" were the two most mentioned learning themes, followed by "managing one's career." Advices on how to overcome adversity at both personal and organizational levels were offered.*

**Keywords:** hardship, failure, leadership, career development, resilience

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### Introduction

Throughout our career trajectory, many of us have encountered unexpected turbulence and unwelcome setbacks. Such unpredictable events can take the form of business mistakes, career setbacks, missed promotions, downsizing due to reorganization, restructuring, failed projects, problem employees, personal trauma, or injustice. The hardship sometimes is a result of bad luck or misfortune with no personal control. However, in many cases it is attributed to our own mistake, poor decision making, or misjudgement. Furthermore, the reversal can also result from a decision to take a calculated risk. Hardship can derail one's career plan. It can trigger a ripple of undesirable effects, such as anxiety, anger, depression, burnout, and self-doubt. However, hardship also presents an opportunity for reflection, for developing resilience, and for personal growth. Hardship is a major event in one's career development yet very few studies have been published in library literature as to what individuals learn from hardship experiences.

A simple definition of hardship is something difficult or unpleasant that must be endured or overcome. Other common terms used for the experience of hardship are adversity, crisis, difficulty, misfortune, hard times, setbacks, and derailment. Research by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) shows that top business executives mention hardship more than any other experience as a key event in their career development (Moxley & Pulley, 2003). This research project looks at how library leaders and managers overcome adverse experiences, move beyond negative feelings, and continue on a successful career trajectory. Specifically, we aim to address the following research questions:

1. What types of hardship events do library leaders identify as significant to their careers?
2. What are the lessons the subjects learned from hardship?
3. How do hardship experiences contribute to subjects' growth and career achievement?

It is hoped that the lessons learned from this study will inform library and information professionals who may be coping with difficult career or personal situations by sharing how others have successfully navigated hardships or adversity in ways that allowed them to continue on a successful career path. It is also hoped that the findings can advise library administrators in offering a safe and supportive environment, as well as positive developmental opportunities, for employees dealing with difficult experiences.

### **Hardships and Leadership Development**

There is a great body of research and anecdotal evidence supporting the conclusion that a managers' ability to learn from challenging events, including hardships and derailment, contributes to their success and advancement in their career. In a landmark study on how corporate executives develop their leadership, Lindsey, Homes, and McCall (1987) from CCL interviewed 191 successful executives on the "key events" in their careers and identified 616 stories and 1,547 lessons learned from these events. In their analysis, they classified these pivotal developmental events into four categories: Developmental Assignments, Hardships, Other People, and Other Significant Events. In the Hardships category, they group its 107 stories into five types of hardships: Business Failures and Mistakes, Demotions / Missed Promotions / Lousy Jobs, Breaking a Rut, Subordinate Performance Problems, and Personal Trauma. Together, these hardships stories are associated with 16 types of learning lessons.

In subsequent studies, modelled after the framework developed by Lindsey et al. (1987), the categories of hardships and lessons learned evolved with the changes in the corporate environment and management practices. Some of the hardship categories were merged, others were added, and category names and definitions were also changed. Table 1 lists the types of hardships from different studies.

Table 1. Types of Hardships and Numbers of Lessons from Previous Studies

Study	Hardships	Lessons
Lindsey, Homes, & McCall, 1987; McCall, 1988	5 types of hardships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business failures &amp; mistakes</li> <li>• Demotions / missed promotions / lousy jobs</li> <li>• Breaking a rut</li> <li>• Subordinate performance problems</li> <li>• Personal trauma</li> </ul>	16
McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988	5 types of hardships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal trauma</li> <li>• Career setback</li> <li>• Changing jobs</li> <li>• Business mistakes</li> <li>• Subordinate performance problems</li> </ul>	10
McCauley, Moxley, & Velsor, 1998	5 types of hardships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business mistakes &amp; failures</li> <li>• Career setbacks</li> <li>• Personal trauma</li> <li>• Problem employees</li> <li>• Downsizing</li> </ul>	14
Douglas, 2003	7 types of hardships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business mistakes</li> <li>• Lousy job / missed promotion</li> <li>• Problem with subordinate</li> <li>• Personal trauma</li> <li>• Race mattered</li> <li>• Downsizing</li> <li>• Gender mattered</li> </ul>	13
Moxley & Pulley, 2004	6 types of hardships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mistakes &amp; failures</li> <li>• Career setbacks</li> <li>• Personal trauma</li> <li>• Problem employees</li> <li>• Downsizing</li> <li>• Experiences when race mattered</li> </ul>	4
Cohill, 2007	6 types hardships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business mistakes &amp; failures</li> <li>• Career setbacks</li> <li>• Problem employees</li> <li>• Personal trauma</li> <li>• Downsizing</li> <li>• Race, age &amp; sex-based discrimination</li> </ul>	10
Yip & Wilson, 2010	5 types of adverse situations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crisis</li> <li>• Scandal</li> <li>• Mistakes</li> <li>• Career setbacks</li> <li>• Ethical dilemmas</li> </ul>	3 learning categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leading self</li> <li>• Leading others</li> <li>• Leading the organization</li> </ul>

In these studies, hardships are consistently viewed as a critical developmental event in preparing the quality and leadership skills of managers. Together with challenging job assignments, relationship development, coursework and training, hardships provide the opportunities and motivation for managers to gain self-knowledge, develop additional skills, affirm values, and to increase their capacity to change and adapt in today's dynamic business world.

The ability to manage hardship has been found to be associated with the success of a career. Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley (1988) found that there is a significant difference in eight managerial dimensions between successful senior managers and those derailed. These areas include the ability to admit and learn from personal mistakes, remain composed in a crisis situation, and be comfortable with ambiguous, uncertain, and stressful situations. In another study, De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt, & Klehe (2009) reported that challenging job and work-related hardship is a prerequisite for promotion and career advancement. Managers engaging in challenging job experiences is positively related to organizational promotability and the favorability of supervisor evaluation. Zhu, Wolff, Hall, Heras, Gutierrez, & Kram (2013) further found that managers who have more diverse and complex work experiences, including serving in an executive assistant role or rotating through different types of jobs, develop higher levels of adaptability, are able to face adversity with courage, and are better at managing uncertainty.

Managing hardships is reported to be closely associated with resilience. Diane Contou (2002, p. 47) quotes CEO Dean Becker as saying, "More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails."

Several studies have shown that resilience contributes to an individual's ability to overcome hardships. When investigating the link between obstacles and a leader's resilience, Howard and Irving (2014) found that development antecedents, including persevering through personal or professional barriers and overcoming traumatic life experiences, contribute to a leader's resiliency. In another study, Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng (2015) found individuals with strong emotional stability, self-efficacy and internal locus of control, are more resilient in the face of adversity in their career. In the field of education, Pankake and Beaty (2005) interviewed 12 successful female educational leaders on how they developed their resiliency. Their results show that these leaders viewed positive and negative situations as opportunity to develop leadership and to address adversity. Five strategies were identified in overcoming adversity in their lives: finding their own niche, looking to mentors for guidance, support from family, reflection and prayer, and refocusing on the reason for entering education.

Building on the findings from previous research, we would argue that successful library leaders have mastered failures and gained valuable lessons from hardships throughout their career. These experiences further contributed to their growth and career advancement.

## **Methodology**

The survey is based upon the frameworks developed by Carrie Cohill (2007) and Christina Douglas (2003) on critical events that contributed to the development of effective leaders. While both Cohill and Douglas focused on corporate executives, this survey will look exclusively at individuals in the library profession.

## Survey Instrument

Based on the interview questions developed by Cohill (2007), an online survey (see Appendix A) was developed and tested. An invitation with link to the Qualtrics survey site was sent to the potential subjects. Two reminders were sent after the first week and second weeks of initial invitation. Of the 22 responses received within the three-week survey period, 12 are completed and deemed valid responses.

## Subject

Convenience and snowball sampling is used in recruiting the subjects of this study. Through personal connection, the researchers identified potential participants who have been in the library and information science profession for more than 15 years and hold managerial positions, such as library dean or director, senior executive, and department head. In total, 41 potential subjects were identified.

## Participant Characteristics

Among those 12 participants who completed the survey questionnaire, eight are male and four are female. When asked about their ethnic and racial composition, 11 of them indicated they are White and one, Latino. The years they have been in the library profession range from 13 to 48 with a mean of 30.3 years and median (the midpoint) of 30 years. Eight of them work in academic library, one in health science library, one in public library, one in school library, and one in special library. The following table shows participant's demographics:

Table 2: Participant Demographics (n=12)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Female	4	33.3%
Male	8	66.7%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Latino	1	8.3%
White	11	91.7%
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
36-45	3	25.00%
46-55	2	16.67%
56-65	2	16.67%
Over 65	5	41.67%
<b>Type of Library</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Academic	8	66.7%
Health Science	1	8.3%
Public	1	8.3%

School	1	8.3%
Special	1	8.3%

## Hardships

The 12 participants submitted 14 hardship events. The table below provides definition of each type of hardship, and the breakdown, in descending order, of self-reported hardship events by the participants.

Table 3: Hardship Definition and Count

Hardship	Definition	Count
Personnel issue	Problem employees or conflict with others	4
Career setbacks	Missed promotions, unsatisfying jobs, demotion, being fired, and derailment	3
Reorganization / downsizing	Losing one's job, reassignment, or being responsible for telling others they have been laid off due to downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, reengineering, reorganization	3
Challenging assignment	Unexpected assignment and promotion	2
Business mistakes and failures	Failed ideas, unsuccessful deals, bad judgement, poor decisions, or erroneous execution	1
Personal trauma	Personal mishap, such as illness, divorce, death in family, natural disaster, threatening the health and well-being of the individual or her/his family	1
Discrimination	An injustice resulting from race, age, or sex-based discrimination, or pregnancy-based or sexual/gender harassment.	0
TOTAL		14

## Findings

The 12 participants told 14 stories of critical career events with 41 lessons learned. Table 4 shows the breakdown by the six types of hardship with the number of lessons learned grouped by learning themes used by Cohill (2007) and Douglas (2003). Appendix B provides a description of each learning theme. The hardship category with the greatest amount of stories was personnel issue (4 stories and 12 lessons), followed by reorganization / downsizing (3 stories and 11 lessons), career setbacks (3 stories and 6 lessons), challenging assignment (2 stories and 7 lessons), personal trauma (1 stories and 3 lessons), and business mistakes and failure (1 stories and 2 lessons). There is no story related to discrimination.

Table 4: Number of Hardship Stories and Lesson Learned per Hardship

<b>Hardship and Learning Themes</b>	<b>Stories Told</b>	<b>Lessons Learned</b>	<b>Lesson Subtotals</b>
<i>Personnel Issue</i>	4		
• Coping with events beyond your control		4	
• Learning about oneself		4	
• Confront and act on people problems		2	
• Managing one's career		1	
• Balance between life and work		1	12
<i>Reorganization and Downsizing</i>	3		
• Coping with events beyond your control		3	
• Learning about oneself		2	
• Handling relationship		2	
• Cynicism		1	
• Managing one's career		3	11
<i>Career Setbacks</i>	3		
• Coping with events beyond your control		2	
• Learning about oneself		1	
• Managing one's career		3	6
<i>Challenging Assignments</i>	2		
• Learning about oneself		2	
• Handling relationship		2	
• Managing one's career		2	
• Developing task and managerial skills		1	7
<i>Personal Trauma</i>	1		
• Coping with events beyond your control		1	
• Learning about oneself		1	
• Sensitivity to others		1	3
<i>Business Mistakes and Failure</i>	1		
• Coping with events beyond your control		1	
• Learning about oneself		1	2
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>

In Table 5, the 41 lessons are grouped by 9 learning themes. Two learning themes, “coping with events beyond your control” and “learning about oneself,” were mentioned the most by participants, each accounting for 26.8% of the total lessons reported. The third largest learning theme is “managing one’s career” (22.0%). The remaining themes with more than one lesson learned are: “handling relationship” (9.8%), and “confront and act on personnel problem” (4.9%).

Table 5: Number of Learning Themes by Hardship

11 Learning Themes	Personal Trauma	Career Setbacks	Business Mistakes & Failure	Personnel Issue	Reorganization and Downsizing	Challenging Assignments	Subtotals	Percentage of Total Lessons
Coping with events beyond your control	1	2	1	4	3		11	26.8%
Learning about oneself	1	1	1	4	2	2	11	26.8%
Managing one's career		3		1	3	2	9	22.0%
Handling relationship					2	2	4	9.8%
Confront and act on people problems				2			2	4.9%
Balance between life and work				1			1	2.4%
Cynicism					1		1	2.4%
Developing task and managerial skills						1	1	2.4%
Sensitivity to others	1						1	2.4%
TOTALS	3	6	2	12	11	7	41	100.0%

## Personnel Issue

### Learning theme: learning about oneself.

Issues related to difficult personnel issues are among the most commonly mentioned hardships by individuals in managerial positions. Four of our survey respondents shared stories about having to deal with a difficult personnel issue. One subject (S7) told the story of a personnel issue with a direct report that escalated to a higher level involving human resources and the Dean of Libraries. The issue involved abuse of organizational work policies. Through this stressful situation, the subject gained insight on her own weaknesses and strengths when handling confrontation:

“On a negative note, I realized I do not like conflict and wait too long to address conflict. I also learned that my paper trail needs to be more detailed. On a positive note, I learned that I can remain calm in a very tense situation and that I can rise above adversity.”

In another incident, the subject (S7) handled an employee performance review badly. This event helped the subject to understand more about what types of skills and support she needs as a manager. She learned that:

“I am a reasonable person, who needs input from others in order for my department to succeed. I also knew then that there were many things about managing employees that I didn't know. Unfortunately, I knew I had an insufficient boss for my needs. Once he left, and I had a new boss, I received better mentoring and was ultimately more successful.”

Another subject (S6) shared a very difficult a personnel case that involved the termination of a direct report. He reported that this particular case and other personnel matters he had faced in his career “had instilled the confidence that I could manage both the stress and my emotions.”

In another case, the subject (S17) in his early career had serious issues with a subordinate who was a close friend of the subject’s supervisor. The subject ended up transferring to another department. Overcoming this traumatic event, the subject learned that “I was strong” and that he was capable of making a fresh start.

**Learning theme: confront and act on people problems.**

The manager (S7) who had to deal with a direct report’s abuse of specific work policies learned to “[a]ddress conflicts / disputes head-on and in a timely manner, but also with calm and confidence armed with facts about the conflict and corresponding policy” and to be “more clear in outlining and communicating my expectations as a manager as well as employee expectations.”

The participant (S17) who was transferred to another department due to the friendship between his subordinate and his supervisor learned that he should “have articulated earlier my concerns with my former supervisor about her close friendship with the employee I was supervising.”

**Learning theme: coping with events beyond your control.**

The subject (S7) with a disobedient employee who abused work policies and who also encouraged ‘mobbing’ behavior against her in the workplace coped with the situation by taking multiple actions, including speaking with Human Resources to ensure understanding of the policies involved and consulting with other managers in her organization:

“Speaking with other managers was extremely helpful on a professional level as well as an emotional level. It was validating to learn of other managers’ struggles and challenges and how they dealt with them in the workplace. The Dean of Libraries was especially supportive during this trying time.”

As a result of this event, she was able to build “stronger relationships with other managers in the library;” she acquired “a clearer understanding of my role with employees I supervised;” she strengthened her “relationship with the Dean of Libraries;” and she developed more knowledge of University policy and resources.

In the case when the subject (S7) received insufficient guidance and support from her boss in handling an employee review issue, she persevered on her own:

“I did my best to take over control of the situation. Over time was able to rebuild the relationship with the employee. When my boss left the company, it was easier to work with the employee.”

“If you feel like you are receiving bad advice, stuck in the middle of a difficult situation, or just not sure how to handle a situation, find someone (a mentor) outside of the situation who can provide consultation. You'd be surprised how much seasoned managers have seen. They can usually provide anecdotal advice, which you can then apply to your situation. It also helps to know that you're not the only person who has been in this position, and that you will come out the other end.”

The participant (S6) who terminated a direct report also relied on formal and informal support within his organization. For formal support he relied on “campus personnel and administrative resources, as well as my direct supervisor (Provost), to ensure that proper procedures were followed.” He also benefited from legal counsel and the support of peers. “My Management Team was wholeheartedly supportive of me throughout the entire experience. Their counsel, advice and encouragement sustained me.”

The subject (S17) whose subordinate had a close personal relationship with his supervisor overcame this traumatic experience with the “nurturing support from the head of HR and my new supervisor.”

#### **Learning theme: managing one's career.**

The subject (S7) who badly handled an employee review learned that some adverse situations cannot be improved without a significant change.

“One variable needed to change – my boss, or my employee” and “if one of the variables hadn't changed (i.e., my boss leaving), I had decided that the situation was negatively affecting my personal life, and I was starting the process of finding another job.” The advice from this, is to have confidence in yourself, and realize when you're in a negative situation that you can't influence, you may need to remove yourself from it.”

#### **Learning theme: balance between life and work.**

For the subject (S7) with insufficient support from her boss on an employ performance issue, the hardship had led her to reconsider how she wanted to live her life:

“I had decided that the situation was negatively affecting my personal life, and I was starting the process of finding another job. The advice from this, is to have confidence in yourself, and realize when you're in a negative situation that you can't influence, you may need to remove yourself from it.”

## **Reorganization and Downsizing**

Organizations reduce workforce due to restructuring, reorganization, reengineering, e-engineering, downsizing and rightsizing, and outsourcing. Incumbents might lose their job or receive a demotion. They might be responsible for the reorganization efforts. Three participants reported their experience in dealing with such event. One subject was one of four librarian positions eliminated due to downsizing. Two other subjects had to deal with difficulty due to reorganization.

### **Learning theme: coping with events beyond your control.**

All three participants had to deal with a difficult situation that was out of their control. The subject (S1) who was among the four librarians who lost their job due to a reorganization reported that she had to “dig in” and look for a new job. Fortunately, her old colleagues were willing to serve as references and she eventually found a new job six months later.

After the closing of a library, the colleagues of the second participant (S12) either left or were reassigned to other positions. She ended up reporting to a new supervisor with whom she had some communication issues. Describing how she felt, she wrote "At the time I didn't feel like I had any power or control over the situation." Her strategies for coping included: "I looked for a position elsewhere. I also confided in new friends at work. I tried to work with my supervisor to address communication issues." Eventually, she found a new job.

The third subject (S19) recounted the upheavals after a reorganization at his library as:

“The nature of much of my work did not change but it was highly toxic working in such a negative and demoralizing environment. The lack of professional respect from inept and unqualified administrators was seriously unsettling. Far too much time was spent on sharing perceived grievances and outrages with colleagues!”

This individual felt that he and his colleagues were not respected by the new administrative leadership. To cope with this situation, he kept a low profile and continued to fulfill basic responsibilities while receiving support from long-term library colleagues who respected his career accomplishments, and who were also suffering similar feelings.

### **Learning theme: learning about oneself.**

The subject (S1) who lost her job after downsizing at her library reported that being among multiple people laid off helped maintain her self-confidence, saying that “I was one of 4 (got laid off), I felt it wasn’t just me but poor management. I just dug in and found a great job 6 months later. Better pay and less work.” However, she also reported that the layoff made her reflect upon how she is perceived by leadership, “I have always known that I say what I think ... that continually gets me in trouble.”

The subject (S19) who was troubled and unsettled after a reorganization at his library reflected that the problem at his organization was with “unqualified administrators” and one should “never stop believing in one’s self worth and accomplishments.”

**Learning theme: handling relationships.**

The subject (S12) who was reassigned to a different boss when her library closed learned that:

"My new supervisor was also upset at my reassignment and felt threatened by my joining their group ... It is important that I have a good relationship with my supervisor."

Another subject (S1) who lost her job commented:

"[T]hose in power do not seem to be able to hear opposition, and that continually gets me in trouble ... Do not question/disagree with the Dean/Director. That person makes the decisions."

**Learning theme: cynicism.**

Not every lesson is positive. Individuals might learn in a hard way that they should not be too trusting and others will not tell you what they are thinking. Even worse, they can turn their backs on you. Reorganization and downsizing are potentially destructive and can threaten the stability of an organization. Feelings of anger and distrust can trigger cynical reactions and criticisms as one subject (S19) stated:

"The lack of professional respect from inept and unqualified administrators was seriously unsettling. Far too much time was spent on sharing perceived grievances and outrages with colleagues!"

"Even reorganization nightmares and administrative incompetence eventually come to an end. It is important not to let the bastards win."

**Learning theme: managing one's career.**

All three subjects who experienced a reorganization talked about taking more ownership of their career. The subject (S1) who lost her job after the reorganization commented:

"I have been a volunteer librarian for my congregation for over 20 years, and I have continued that work so I am still a librarian. I remain professionally active where people appreciate my contribution."

The other subject (S12) who was reassigned to a different supervisor pointed out that she had learned to "ask better questions during [job] interviews to understand the culture that is present."

Finally, the third subject (S19) learned:

"The importance [is] never stop believing in [oneself]. The support and trust of colleagues is invaluable. Even reorganization nightmares and administrative incompetence eventually come to an end. Ultimately it enriched my career as one grows from adversity if not destroyed by it."

## **Career Setbacks**

Even though the subjects we solicited for the survey were considered to be highly successful in their career trajectory, their responses revealed that they had experienced missed promotions, resignations, or even lost jobs. Three participants gained insights under five learning themes as a result of a career setback.

### **Learning theme: coping with events beyond your control.**

All three participants talked about their strategies in managing and accepting an event beyond their control. One subject (S1) with 40-plus years of experience, was devastated when she was denied for tenure and was given a year to find another job elsewhere. She was fully aware that “it is very hard to even get an interview when people see you’re [in your early 60s] and they think there are only 4-5 years left.” Although (S1) was feeling “stupid and incompetent,” she was able to cope with the situation and persevere by soliciting support from colleagues:

“[P]eople tell me they appreciate my input and how I handle issues. This, at least, makes me feel less stupid and incompetent. My former boss and her boss, have been very supportive.”

Another subject (S4) who left an unsatisfying job in his early career learned that one should not expect every position or employer to be perfect. Instead, one should “take the opportunity to learn and grow in the profession.” The other subject (S2) was passed over for promotion and the impact prompted him to “work harder.”

### **Learning theme: learning about oneself.**

Participants learned to face their limitations, blind spots, and weaknesses from a career setback. When subject (S4) resigned from an unsatisfying position, without another position lined up his career and professional momentum was disrupted for more than a year until he found another position. This gave him time to reflect upon his personal traits that led to this decision and on his expectations for his work environment.

"[a]s someone in their 20s often is, I was overconfident [in] my abilities and not patient to find opportunities."

"I realized that job satisfaction isn't handed to you. You have to take the initiative to make a position satisfying and contribute positively to the library, even if there are underlying issues with the organization."

### **Learning theme: managing one's career.**

Participants learned to turn a setback as a precious lesson. The denial of promotion motivated one subject (S2) to “work harder.” The subject (S4) who resigned from a dissatisfying job gained insightful lessons:

“Job satisfaction isn't handed to you ... [e]specially for entry level jobs ... don't get frustrated with an environment that you may not find invigorating. Take the opportunity to learn and grow in the profession. Be confident, but always keep

your eyes and ears open to alternate ways of thinking. Have the confidence and discipline to create opportunities for yourself in jobs that you may not initially find satisfying."

The subject (S1) who did not receive tenure took control of her career by volunteering and participating in professional organization:

"I have been a volunteer librarian for my congregation for over 20 years, and I have continued that work so I am still a librarian. I remain professionally active where people appreciate my contribution" and "I was elected to office in an ALA division, and people tell me they appreciate my input and how I handle issues."

### **Challenging Assignments**

Although challenging assignments is not one of the adversity events listed in the survey questionnaire, two responses reported their experience in managing challenging assignments in the "Other" category. According to Douglas (2003), there are five types of challenging assignments: Start from scratch, Fix-it / turnaround, Project / task force, Change in scope, Line-to-staff switch, and Breaking a rut. Managers might be given difficult tasks, projects, and assignments outside their defined scope of duty. Challenging assignments require additional skill sets, new knowledge and expertise, and they provide a unique opportunity to broaden and deepen one's experience and leadership skills. However, they can also create the potential for failure and therefore add significant stress.

### **Learning theme: developing task and managerial skills.**

One participant (S5) was assigned to turning around a failing IT operation at his library. The IT department suffered from a series of crisis, including the loss of two IT professionals, the compromise of a web server, and the poor and unstable performance of their website for over a year. With the help from IT consultants, he was able to resolve the performance issues, fill the vacant positions, and eventually he was awarded the Head of IT position. The success of fixing the problem was really a trial by fire experience for the subject. By getting his feet wet and learning by doing, he acquired essential hands-on experience in IT operation and management that he might not have acquired otherwise:

"I gained a lot of experience the hard way in system administration and web application troubleshooting ... the importance of emergency preparedness and having a disaster recovery plan ... I learned to emphasize security in all its forms within the IT environment. I learned that in a small organization documentation is just as important if not more so than in large organizations. I learned that any amount of cross training within the IT department is much better than no amount of cross training. I learned it is often a mistake to rely on custom web applications, it is better to use open source applications with a large community of developers. In short I learned a lot, not just about tech but about management and leadership, and things are much better now!"

### **Learning theme: learning about oneself.**

One subject (S3) was unexpectedly promoted to a very senior position at a large library. He “plunged in” and learned as much as quickly as he could about the entire organization. The promotion increased the scope of his responsibilities and he had the opportunity to gain a cross-organizational view of operations. He was proud that he “...could learn quickly and gain people's respect by listening to them and advocating for them.”

The subject (S5) who fixed the IT operation issue at his library gained insight about his own capacity for dealing with stress:

“In some ways I learned about my own limits for job stress, which were ‘further out’ than I might have ever imagined.”

### **Learning theme: managing one’s career.**

The subject (S3) who was promoted to a senior position indicated that this event brought new opportunities and “completely transformed my career, particularly in introducing me to the world of international librarianship, which I had never even thought about.”

The “accidental” system librarian (S5) who fixed the IT operation at his library doubted his willingness to take on new responsibilities that took him off his career trajectory. However, this challenging assignment expanded his knowledge and resulted in significant career opportunities.

### **Learning theme: handling relationship.**

The subject (S3) who moved up to a senior position reported that he received support from quite a few colleagues who were happy to that he was entrusted with this new responsibility. There were also some who opposed his promotion. Reflecting on his experience, the subject indicated that he needed to learn to “spend more time talking with and cultivating more senior colleagues who were offended by my promotion.”

The subject (S5) who successfully remediated the IT deficiencies in his library emphasized the importance of forming effective working relationships with peers:

“I would advise others that the only way to be prepared for a huge range of possible IT management problems is to build relationships and networks both within your institution and among your peers. In the end don't expect to solve all the situations you may face all on your own, you will need to ask for help and you may need a cool head as well as patience and faith if the challenges are particularly difficult.”

### **Personal Trauma**

It is said that fortune as unpredictable as the weather, every day may bring fortune and calamity. In real life, nothing is so certain as the unexpected. Threatening events related to the well-being and personal life of managers or their family can have severe impact on their work and force them to reassess the priority of their life and work. Only one respondent mentioned this type of event which in this instance involved the serious illness of a family member. Three learning themes emerged from her account of this personal event.

**Learning theme: coping with events beyond your control.**

The sick family member was in and out the hospital for more than a year, so the participant (S8) had to concentrate on this matter and “pull back from responsibilities and disengage a bit from my job ... It was all I could do to perform the basic functions of my job.” With the support from her superiors and colleagues, she was given substantial leave time to take care of her family member. During that time, she and a colleague presented a local conference and her colleague “did most of the work honestly. It was very difficult.”

**Learning theme: learning about oneself.**

For the subject (S8), this hardship served as a powerful reminder about personal limits “[t]hat I am vulnerable ...” and “You cannot do anything alone and must rely on others.”

**Learning theme: sensitivity to others.**

Recognizing we all are subject to human frailty, the participant (S8) realized the need for being compassionate and humane to managing or working with others:

“I am much more empathetic when something major is affecting someone else's job performance. I recognize the signs better when someone is overwhelmed.”

**Business Mistakes and Failure**

Mistakes can be caused by inexperience, poor judgement, carelessness, impetus, and miscalculation. The consequence can be costly and severe.

**Learning theme: learning about oneself.**

A participant (S9) recounted an incident when he made an unauthorized ultimatum at a meeting in the early stage of his career. He was privately reprimanded by his supervisor.. After his supervisor reprimanded him, he “felt a loss of credibility and humiliation.” This incident and his supervisor’s feedback heightened his self-awareness about his need for control and power. He realized that “I can be impetuous and overtaken by a need for control and power. Not good.”

**Learning theme: coping with events beyond your control.**

The participant (S9) who spoke out of turn and was admonished by his supervisor reported that he developed skills in managing complicated issues, ambiguity, and stress as a result of this event:

“I will consider all alternatives before taking a stand, identify the underlying problems, seek first to understand and seek solutions with others, and reflect, reflect, reflect ... Step back. Breathe. Consider alternatives. Consider win-win or at least common ground solutions.”

## Discussion

The 12 respondents who completed the survey questionnaire were comprised of eight males and four females. In total, they told 14 stories of hardship experiences with 41 lessons learned. Dealing with personnel issues was the most reported hardship experiences with four stories and 12 lessons, followed by reorganization / downsizing (three stories and 11 lessons) and Career setback (three stories and 6 lessons).

The responses collected in this study support four common learning themes that stem from a hardship experience.

### Learning about Oneself

Several participants commented that the adverse event provoked introspection and self-assessment. They were able to learn and accept their limitations, strengths, shortcomings, and blind spots. Moxley and Pulley (2004) describe this process as “unfreezing” experiences that cause an individual to take stock of their strengths and weaknesses. Introspection helped the subjects to adjust their career goals and options, review their relationship with others, and assess balance between work and life. Unfreezing can also help individuals to identify areas for improvement in their pursuit of leadership. Consequently, this reality-check process heightened individual self-awareness and helped the subjects develop new perspectives that added value to future career experiences. Some of the lessons reported by participants of this study include:

- Recognizing strengths: “I could learn quickly and gain people’s respect by listening to them and advocating for them” (S3); “I can remain calm in a very tense situation and I can rise above adversity” (S7); “I could manage both the stress and my emotions” (S6); “I was strong” (S17)
- Identifying weaknesses: “I am vulnerable” (S8); “I was overconfident [in] my abilities ... and not patient ...” (S4); “I do not like conflict” (S7); “I can be impetuous and overtaken by a need for control and power”
- New perspective: “I would have asked for my whole 5 years before review to show impact” (S1); I learned to be more clear in outlining and communicating my expectations as a manager” (S7); “I should have articulated earlier my concerns” (S17); “I realized that job satisfaction isn’t handed to you.” (S4); “My new supervisor was also upset at my reassignment and felt threatened by my joining their group...” (S12); “I am much more empathetic...” (S8).
- Gaining self-confidence: “I could manage both the stress and my emotions” (S6); “I was strong” (S17); “never stop believing in one’s self worth and accomplishments” (S19)
- Acquiring self-trust: “I learned about my own limits for job stress, which were ‘further out’ than I might have ever imagined” (S5)

## **Coping with Circumstances beyond Your Control**

Unlike other developmental events, such as challenging jobs, training, and coaching, hardships are unique in that they can be intensely personal and they are not planned (McCauley, Moxley, & Velsor, 1998). A sense of loss, a loss of control, identity, self-confidence, job security, credibility, and self-efficacy are common experiences. Facing such hardships, participants had to re-examine their career and life priorities, then develop coping mechanisms. Some examples of coping mechanisms from this study include:

- Reducing workload: “pull back from responsibilities disengage a bit from my job” (S8)
- Hanging in and persevering: “ignore the gossip, the personal tweets, the tension at meetings and other library events” (S7); “I did my best to take over control of the situation” (S7); “I continue to fulfill my basic responsibilities as best as I could” (S19)
- Moving on: “Picked up the chips and started over” (S17)
- Seeking support: “I also confided in new friends at work” (S12); “Personal support from subordinates and peers was essential” (S6); “build relationships and networks both within your institution and among your peers” (S5)
- Be positive, remain optimistic: “Step back. Breathe” (S9); “Never stop believing in one’s self worth and accomplishments” (S19); “take the initiative ... contribute positively to the library” (S4)

## **Handling Relationships**

Almost all participants mentioned they are grateful for support and advice from colleagues, direct reports, or peers outside their organization during the difficult period.

- Soliciting support from others: “The support and trust of colleagues is invaluable” (S19); “Nurturing support from the head of HR and my new supervisor” (S17); “have a good network both at work and away from work” (S12); “My direct supervisor ... supported me publicly. I was forever in his debt” (S9); “You cannot do anything alone and must rely on others” (S8); “in the middle of a difficult situation ... find someone (a mentor) outside of the situation who can provide consultation” (S7); “Find support in other managers, HR, or other stakeholders” (S7); “trust in those who have been your closet colleagues” (S6); “My Management Team was wholeheartedly supportive of me throughout the entire experience” (S6); “I had help and patience from library and university administration” (S5); “I had support from numerous colleagues” (S3); “My former boss and her boss have been very supportive ... They have been willing to serve as references” (S1)
- Listening: “I could learn quickly and gain people's respect by listening to them and advocating for them” (S3)

- Compassion, showing gratitude: “Understand that others are also undergoing stress through the change process” (S12)
- Sensitive to others: “I am much more empathetic when something major is affecting someone else's job performance” (S8)

## **Resilience**

The duration of a hardship can be lengthy and its impact can exceed beyond personal level. The difficult personnel experience that one subject (S6) had to endure “lasted more than four full years.” The subject (S4) who quitted his job prematurely did not land the next position for more than a year and “the resignation stopped any professional momentum” that he accrued. The subject (S5) who was thrust into fixing the issues at the library’s IT group took over a year to get the issues resolved. The manager who had to deal with the negative consequences of an employee who abused a work policy worked on the issue for more than year. The subject (S8) with personal trauma stated that her sick family member “was in and out of the hospital for 18 months.” As Patterson (2001, p. 18) pointed out, resilience is a “long-term construct ... Resilience doesn’t fluctuate daily like the stock market.” Resilience or the ability to persevere during times of adversity are qualities that participants learned to recognize in themselves and to cultivate.

## **Advice from Library Leaders**

The stories from these participants paint a clear picture of the scope and scale of hardships, the strain they endured, and strengths of resilience the subjects demonstrated. Implicitly, the stories further reveal how these leaders were able to overcome adversity, learn from it, and use what they learned to go on to successful careers. Based on these experiences, librarians experiencing adversity might consider the following advice:

1. Seize and be grateful for opportunity. Take on new challenges, even if they feel risky. You will learn from them.
2. Take initiative to make your position satisfying. Find ways to contribute positively. Think about what you can do to make a negative situation better for yourself and others.
3. If there is nothing you can do to improve a situation, consider removing yourself from it by moving on.
4. Address problem relationships sooner rather than later.
5. Seek advice and mentoring that will help you manage negative situations.
6. Strengthen relationships with supporters who affirm your strengths, but keep community open with those who may criticize you.
7. Reflect on hardship experiences, but then let them go and continue moving forward with confidence.
8. Trust your instincts and be confident, but remain open to new ways of thinking.

9. Look for win, win solutions.

### **Organizational Implications**

Hardship is an irreducible fact of our lives. What organizations, library administrators, and human resources managers can do to support employees facing hardships in their career and personal life? According to Moxley and Pulley (2004), managers should view hardships an opportunity to develop resilience and other leadership skills. Some of their suggestions for line managers and human resources professionals to institute a return on experience framework include:

- Recognize the risk of adversity events by helping individuals identify formal and informal support within the organization. Intervene as appropriate when employees are overwhelmed with business mistakes, downsizing, challenging assignment, and dealing with personnel issue.
- Acknowledge that mistakes are part of the learning process in acquiring new skills or in challenging assignments and are unavoidable. Organizations should implement a “mistake system,” suggested by McCauley, Lombardo, Morrison (1988), and treat mistake as a developmental opportunity. While encouraging employees to take on difficult assignments and calculated risk, organizations also provide a safety net for mistakes as well as reward individuals who are willing to operate outside the comfort zone. In discussing the design of a librarian development program, Bakkalbasi, Jaggars, Rockenbach (2015) suggested that libraries should cultivate a culture that views mistakes and failures as a critical process of learning and career development.
- Offer honest feedback and guidance. Managers should provide forthright discussion on the mistake and its effect with individuals to ensure they learn from the experiences, as well as help them recover from the setback and move on. Offer training or course work if necessary.

Library profession in today’s information landscape faces constant changes due to complex organizational environment, rapid technology advancement, dynamic economic condition, diverse user population, and extensive globalization. While the practice of entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity, and learning from mistakes is encouraged in librarianship, we should also attain an aptitude of managing uncertainty and adversity. In our study, the insights and stories shared by these well-rounded library leaders shows that when circumstances are difficult there are meanings be found and wisdom that can last a lifetime.

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## Appendix A

### Adversity: Advice from Library Leaders

You are invited to participate in a research project on how library managers or leaders overcome the impact of adversity or hardship on a career. Adversity is often life's best teacher. The study aims to learn about how library leaders move beyond career setbacks, turbulence, business mistakes, missed promotions, injustice, or personal trauma and how these experiences may have impacted future success. The survey is based upon work conducted by Carrie Cohill for her dissertation<sup>1</sup>. While Cohill focused on corporate executives, this survey will look exclusively at individuals in the library profession. To date very few studies have been published in library literature on this topic. It is hoped that the lessons learned from this study will inform library and information professionals who may be coping with difficult career or personal situations by sharing how others have successfully navigated adversity in a way that allowed them to continue on a successful career path.

Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be anonymized. The findings from the survey will only be reported in aggregate form. Your assistance will be greatly appreciated. To thank you for your contribution you can receive a copy of the findings by contacting us directly. If you have any questions about the survey, please do not hesitate to contact Jeannette Pierce (piercejea@missouri.edu) or Win Shih (winyuans@usc.edu).

#### I. Critical Event

Looking back in your career, think of a time when you experienced a hardship, an experience that changed your sense of self in a fundamental way. And as a result of this experience, your understanding of who you are, what you are capable of doing, or your place in the world shifted.

1. Which of the following five categories does this experience fit?
  - Business Mistakes and Failures: for which the individual is responsible for this consequence due to failed ideas, unsuccessful deals, bad judgement, poor decisions, or erroneous execution.
  - Career Setbacks: resulting in missed promotions, unsatisfying jobs, demotion, being fired, and derailment. Not all career setbacks are due to limitations of the individual. Reorganization, reengineering, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions can also cause a career setback.

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<sup>1</sup> Cohill, C. (2007). The value of adversity: What corporate executive managers learn from hardship (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (3428410)

- Personnel issue: Problem employees or conflict with others forcing the individual to confront people with personnel issues.
- Personal Trauma: Personal mishap, such as illness, divorce, death in family, natural disaster, threatening the health and well-being of the individual or her/his family.
- Discrimination: in which an individual experiences or observes an injustice resulting from race, age, or sex-based discrimination, or pregnancy-based or sexual/gender harassment.
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. What happened?

3. When did this event happen in your career?

Early career (1-10 years)

Mid-career (11-20 years)

Later career (20+ years)

4. How did this event impact your work at the time?

5. What steps, if any, did you take to sustain or carry on your career?

6. What did you learn about yourself from this experience?

7. Was there anyone or anything that helped you recover from this experience?

8. How might you do things differently next time for different results? How can you use this information in the future?

9. In what ways has that experience affected your overall career?

10. What advice do you have for others facing similar hardship?

11. Would you like to answer these questions for another event?

Yes

No

## **II. Demographic Information**

12. How long have you been in librarianship?

Years \_\_\_\_\_

Would rather not say

13. Your age range:
- 26-35
  - 36-45
  - 46-55
  - 56-65
  - Over 65
  - Would rather not say
14. Gender:
- Female
  - Male
  - Would rather not say
15. Ethnicity / Race (based on ALA diversity report, <http://www.ala.org/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/divcounts>):
- African American
  - Asian / Pacific Islander
  - Latino
  - Native American, including Alaskan
  - White
  - Two or more races
  - Would rather not say
  - Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
16. What types of library / organization you are / were in?
- Academic Library
  - Health Science Library
  - Library Education
  - Public Library
  - School Library
  - Special Library
  - Would rather not say
  - Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Learning Themes

The following descriptions illustrate the kinds of lessons reported in the study by providing explanations and examples.

#### *Balance between Work and Personal Life<sup>#</sup>*

Being brought up short was the central theme of personal traumas, and reflecting on one's inadequacies and blind spots often led to a decision to reconsider how one lives one's life.

### ***Confront and act on people problems<sup>#</sup>***

This was a time to avoid either impulse or procrastination. The courage to invest time and energy in confronting the problem was called for in dealing with the mistakes and foibles of others.

### ***Coping with Events beyond One's Control<sup>#</sup>***

No one can control events, but we can control how we respond – facing the situation and persevering through it were common refrains.

### ***Cynicism\****

This category is defined as a feeling of pessimism or distrust that was learned as a result of a particular event. Lessons falling within this category represent a unique type of lesson that did not readily fall into any of the other lesson categories. The lessons were negative in nature and revolved around an increased sense of distrust toward other people or toward the organization in general. In these lessons individuals describe feelings of anger, disappointment, and sadness. Examples of lessons falling within this category include a distrust of other people (for example, learning not to be too trusting, learning that people won't tell you what they are thinking, learning that friends will turn their backs on you) or an increased pessimism about the organization (for example, a loss of trust, a view that performance was not rewarded, a loss of respect for the organization and corporate life).

### ***Developing task and managerial skills\****

This category includes statements about gaining knowledge or skills that help the individual effectively manage the work. Lessons revolve around developing knowledge about the organization or business, developing skills sets, taking courses, and developing specific task-related competencies. These lessons tend to be fairly specific, and most of the lessons relate to learning how to do something that will get the job done (for example, learning specific technical knowledge, learning how the business works, learning how a particular department works, learning a specific project-related skill such as finance or accounting procedures, learning how to build systems and processes for getting the work done).

### ***Handling Relationships<sup>#</sup>***

The majority of these events involved the failure to take proper account of other people. Managers learned to a potpourri of lessons about the consequences of mistreating and / or ignoring others.

### ***Learning about oneself\****

Statements of self-discovery, self-trust, trusting one's gut, and/or increased self-confidence define this category. These lessons revolve around an increased self-awareness and/or a heightened awareness of the importance of learning about oneself through feedback. Individuals report learning about themselves, either in terms of strengths, personal limits, and/or weaknesses. This category also includes lessons about understanding the importance and value of receiving feedback. Most of the lessons revolve around personal insights regarding strengths (for example, *I am very good at managing others* or *I can handle a lot of stress*) or weaknesses (for example, *I realized that others think I am too aloof*). Some of the lessons seem to reflect a perspective that might be described as "I wish I had done it differently." Several of the lessons are related to gaining self-confidence (for example, *I learned that I am very capable*) or self-trust (for example, *I learned to trust my gut*).

### ***Managing one's career\****

These lessons revolve around an increased awareness of the importance of taking responsibility for managing one's career development, becoming active in planning one's career path, and finding mentors and other types of support in order to manage one's career. Included in this category are statements about discovering one's career preferences, learning to take control of one's career, seizing opportunities, understanding the importance of mentors and networking to career advancement, making sure that new assignments and positions fit with career goals, learning about potential assignments and career moves, finding mentors and coaches, and learning how to balance career goals with personal goals. These lessons focus on managers' learning *20 Key Events and Lessons for Managers in a Diverse Workforce* how to make the most of the resources and individuals around them in order to advance their careers. Many of these lessons relate to taking charge of one's career as opposed to letting others control it. In addition, there are lessons about the importance of balance in one's life (for example, statements of understanding how important one's family is and of balancing different priorities).

### ***Sensitive to Others#***

Like the manager who gave the "rough" performance appraisal, many learned some lessons of compassion as a result of pain.

# Adapted from McCall et al., 1988, pp. 87-120.

\*Adapted from Douglas, 2003, pp. 19-22.