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Executive derailment, coaching and posttraumatic growth: reflections on practice guided by theory

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ABSTRACT

The aim is to discuss the issue of executive career derailment in relation to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the developing field of posttraumatic growth (PTG). There is much research on PTSD and PTG in a variety of contexts but as yet they remain to be applied to the experience of derailment. As such, in this paper I will provide a theoretical discussion of how PTSD and PTG are explained and linked to derailment. This will be followed by a reflection on the implications for how practitioners can help clients move forward following derailment. Understanding how derailment can be the springboard for personal and professional growth offers new opportunities for coaches to adopt a positive psychological mindset. PTG is an emerging area with implications for new research and the development of coaching in this important area of practice.

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Practice points

- Executive career derailment can be experienced as a traumatic event.
- Derailment may under the right circumstances provide the opportunity for PTG.
- Implications for practitioners to help clients move forward following derailment.

Introduction

Coaching aims to help clients use, build and develop their strengths, talents and resources in such a way to enhance their functioning in the workplace or other domains of life. At first glance, the psychology of trauma would appear to have little relevance to this aim, but on closer inspection there is much that coaches can use to benefit their clients. This article will discuss how the concept of posttraumatic growth (PTG) can be applied to coaching and specifically to the issue of executive career derailment. First, I will describe derailment, the consequences it has on clients' functioning and the challenges that it presents to coaches. Second, I will discuss how the concept of PTG provides a new way to understand derailment as the opportunity for positive change. Finally, I will discuss how coaches may be able to use these ideas in practice.

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Executive derailment

Sometimes high-flying executives crash to the ground. This is referred to as executive career derailment. Derailment involves involuntary demotions or redundancy that comes unexpectedly to the person. There are a number of ways in which this can happen. Derailment often occurs because of factors outside the person's control, commonly one of three reasons: illness in which the person is no longer able to fulfil their workplace role; workplace bullying in which the person is marginalised by others and organisational restructuring in which the person is no longer required to perform in their original role (Gray, Gabriel, & Goregaokar, 2015; Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988).

However, while factors outside the person's control are often the trigger, factors within the person that are within their control, such as their ability to self-reflect, empathise with others or provide appropriate leadership, can also play a role (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004). It may be that these internal factors were always a problem and the person was a poor appointment to the position, but more often it is because the situation or the role changes during the course of the person's career. Examples of this would be: first, during organisational restructuring, what was perceived as a strength in the person becomes a weakness (such as technical expertise becoming less important than team building skills); and second, the individual exhibits certain behaviours that served them well at one point in their career, but which become unsuitable in their present context (such as a need to please others helping the person to be promoted to a senior management position, but when promoted and required to make difficult and unpopular decisions being unable to do so).

Such internal factors as those mentioned above can be seen as within the person's control but to which they are not currently attentive and failed to spot the need to develop. Coaches are able to help their clients reflect on and monitor what skills are needed as their role develops and changes. However, there may also be factors internal to the person but less outside their control such as personality traits or level of ability at certain tasks.

Whatever the initial cause, there is usually an interplay over time between factors external to the person and factors internal to the person, in such a way that problems at work can escalate and compound without timely intervention. For example, the person may be absent for some time because of illness but on return find that their relationship with colleagues has changed in such a way that they now experience themselves as the subject of bullying, as perhaps their colleagues perceive them as having feigned illness to take additional time away at a busy period. But because of their lack of assertiveness they react passively towards the bullying. Rather than taking appropriate actions to prevent the bullying such as by drawing it to the attention of senior management who may call in one of the coaches used by the organisation to develop an appropriate team building intervention, they simply hope that it will stop. However, the bullying doesn't stop but intensifies. As such it is important for coaches to understand how derailment can be triggered, how various factors external and internal to the person interact to escalate and compound problems over time.

In my own practice, I have encountered various cases of derailment. Sam was a senior executive at a leading London bank. She had been off work due to illness. After a decade of

long working days and climbing the career ladder her world came crashing down when she was diagnosed as suffering from a fatigue syndrome. Following negotiations with Human Resources (HR) she was maintaining a part-time role within the organisation, working from home two days per week and commuting to the office on one day. The disruption to Sam's career trajectory caused her considerable emotional distress.

Melissa joined her organisation several years previously and was quickly seen as a rising star. However, over the previous year she was subject to bullying by her new line manager. At first, she thought what was happening was not real and that she was imagining it. It took some time for the reality to sink in. Then, she thought it would stop if she worked harder to please her manager. But it just continued and got worse the more she tried to please. After a year Melissa was at breaking point. Distressed and in a state of anxiety, Melissa sought help from her General Practitioner who prescribed medication. Melissa was certainly feeling burnt out, but as she discovered, she was also suffering from workplace-related posttraumatic stress. She was constantly worried and thinking about work, not sleeping well, feeling unable to cope and drinking regularly to help the stress. The organisation provided coaching for her to help her focus on the new organisational aims. From Melissa's point of view, she was already addressing the aims but the perception of her by senior managers was adversely affected by her line manager who was responsible for the bullying.

Jonathan had applied for a senior promotion with the organisation but failed in his application. He was told by HR that his chances of promotion within the organisation were unlikely and that he should now concentrate on his work at the level he was already at. As someone who had invested so much in his career since leaving university this came as a shattering blow to Jonathan who believed strongly that he did have the potential to go to the next level. Jonathan perceived himself as failing to achieve his career aspirations and his work began to suffer as his emotional distress was high, putting him under the spotlight of HR, who he began to perceive as bullying him rather than supporting him, and questioning his future within the company.¹

Executive derailment is not unusual with estimates suggesting that 30–50% of high functioning managers derail at some point in their career (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1995). As such, derailment is a major issue for organisations that can have costly effects on its functioning (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Lombardo & McCauley, 1988). The psychological consequences of derailment are varied as in the cases above, consisting of difficulties with emotional regulation, inflexibility, dissatisfaction with work, depersonalisation and physical ailments, all of which are problems associated with burnout. These problems are already well documented and understood, but less so is that derailment can be experienced as psychologically traumatic.

Trauma and PTG

In this section, I will provide a theoretical discussion of how posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is explained and linked to executive derailment. Executive derailment is not often thought of as traumatic, but, as I will show, people experiencing derailment may indeed exhibit the signs and symptoms of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). PTSD is a debilitating condition consisting of problems of intrusive memories, problems of avoidance, negative cognitions and disturbances in mood, and problems of arousal.

PTSD affects the person's ability to function in their social and occupational lives. It may be that symptoms are not so severe as to warrant a diagnosis of PTSD, although they were in the case of Melissa. But sub-threshold symptoms of PTSD are common, as in the other two cases. Even if the person does not fulfil all criteria for psychiatric diagnosis, it is likely that many of those who experience derailment will suffer from many of the symptoms at a lower level of severity. Problems of intrusive thinking accompanied by distressing emotions and attempts at cognitive and behavioural avoidance to regulate these emotional states is to be expected of anyone experiencing an event that they perceive to be threatening to them.

In order to understand how executive derailment leads to PTSD I will show how the social cognitive processes underlying reactions to events that are more traditionally thought of as a traumatic are the same as those who experience executive derailment. To do this, it is first important to understand Janoff-Bulman's (1992) social cognitive theory of posttraumatic stress – one of the most influential theories of psychological trauma over the past few decades.

Janoff-Bulman (1992) proposed that the signs and symptoms of PTSD are indicative that the person's assumptive world has been threatened. In her description, people try to maintain three core assumptions, notably, that they are worthy, the world is benevolent and the world is meaningful. Unwanted events that are uncontrollable, unexpected and sudden challenge these assumptions. For example, following a violent attack, a person's assumptions about the benevolence of the world is likely to be challenged. In this way, extremely traumatic events shatter people's assumptions. In turn, this leads to states of mental turmoil in which the person suffers from repetitive intrusive thoughts and memories as they struggle to make sense of what has happened and reconcile their assumptive world with the new reality. When this becomes too emotionally overwhelming they switch off, becoming avoidant and numb to help them deal with their reactions. Seen this way, the signs and symptoms of PTSD are indicative of incomplete emotional processing (see, Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1997).

As such, in exactly the same way that traumatic events can shatter a person's assumptions about themselves and their place in the world, so too will the experience of derailment. For example, a person going through derailment may experience a catastrophic loss of identity, threatening their sense of themselves as worthy decent people; or their expectation and aspirations to which they have devoted much of their working life are challenged, upsetting their sense of meaning; or when confronted by hostility and bullying from co-workers, they find themselves unable to maintain a view of the world as benevolent. Often derailment occurs in mid-life (Gabriel, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2010) when it might be expected that one's assumptions about the self and the world have become entrenched and thus change can be particularly challenging. This was evident in all three cases described above, all of whom were in their mid- to late forties. They were hard working, conscientious, employees who had devoted many years to their careers with expectations of advancement, and whose focus in their lives up to that point had been on their careers, and to varying degrees at the expense of their social and family lives. To their knowledge their careers had been going successfully up to the point at which they began to be derailed. As such it would be expected that they too would experience the signs and symptoms characteristic of PTSD.

Janoff-Bulman's (1992) theory shows how stressful and traumatic events can have severe and chronic effects on a person's psychological functioning, and how this accounts for the signs and symptoms of PTSD. However, since Janoff-Bulman (1992) proposed her theory of shattered assumptions, it has been used to explain how positive psychological change can result from challenging and adverse events.

PTG is a term introduced in the 1990s to refer to the phenomenon of people experiencing positive psychological changes following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). PTG is an area of research and practice based on the observation that many survivors of trauma often report how their experiences have been personally growthful (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2015). Unlike the concept of resilience, which describes how a person is able to return rapidly to their prior state of functioning following trauma, PTG describes how trauma can be a springboard to more fully functioning psychological states (Joseph, 2011). The term PTG has served as an umbrella for a range of research concerned with finding benefits, meaning making and growth following adversity (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Derailment may be experienced as traumatic as it shatters assumptions, but the need to rebuild the assumptive world is the engine of PTG (Joseph, 2011). PTG is characterised by a rebuilding of expectations and assumptions, in light of the challenges and threats experienced to them leading to a more realistic view of the world and the self, involving changes in self-perception, relationships and outlook on the world (Joseph, 2011). This is not to say that survivors would wish for the trauma to have happened, but it having happened recognise how it has been a trigger for them to re-evaluate their priorities in life, find strengths within themselves that they were not aware of and move towards greater appreciation of their relationships with others. In this way, new personal and professional developments may arise that are perceived by the person as moving forward in meaningful ways.

Thus, although the literature on PTG has developed in relation to traumatic events, it might be expected that similar experiences of personal and professional growth can arise from experiences of executive derailment, for example, by turning job loss into a new successful career transitions (Carroll, Di Vincenti, & Show, 1995) or in finding other opportunities in life (Kovach, 1989).

In support, a recent study, McCormack, Abou-Hamdan, and Joseph (2017) investigated the experiences of four high functioning professionals following career derailment documenting four stages that their respondents seemed to move through. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Four themes emerged that encapsulated a unique trajectory from severe identity loss to newly defined authenticity following derailment. The first three themes – *Self-doubt and blame; targeted bullying; psychological vulnerability and distress* – describe the psychological unravelling that follows derailment, and the vicarious impact on family life. The fourth theme: *Meaning-making and personal growth*, describes a redefining of that distress from which opportunities for new pathways of career identity and psychological well-being.

What I have observed in my own client work is the similarity of the derailment process to that of PTG. In each of the three cases above, the benefits of change were experienced, but only after each client had experienced considerable distress and upheaval. Sam was able to create for herself a new role within the organisation with the support of HR,

navigating a return to work in such a way that she would continue working part-time but in a new capacity. She found her new role exciting and perceived it to be more fulfilling and rewarding to her personally than what she was doing previously. Also she used the change in her career to reconfigure the rest of her life in a more balanced way becoming more involved in her local community. Melissa eventually left the organisation moving to a different type of employment which is more aligned with her own sense of values. She is engaged in what she perceives as more meaningful and socially important work. Jonathon found a new position at the level he wanted in another prestigious organisation but perceived himself to have developed a greater wisdom and maturity in his struggles. Such stories are not uncommon and will be familiar to coaches, but not often conceptualised as examples of PTG.

As such, derailment can offer the opportunity for reinvention. In ordinary circumstances such reinvention comes slowly as people test the waters of a new identity while continuing in their current career (Ibarra, 2003). However, derailment challenges a person's existing working identity and propels the person to change before they are ready. It may take some time for the person to overcome the shock at the loss of their previous identity. Until they do it is unlikely that they will be able to experience what they are going through as an opportunity for reinvention. In all three cases above, new opportunities for employment were found that better suited their strengths and talents. Understanding that derailment may lead to PTSD which in turn may provide a springboard for PTG has new and important implications for practitioners in coaching. But it must also be remembered that while there are such examples of positive change, there are many similar cases in which the person has not grown as a result of their struggle with derailment, but have been left devastated by it.

Applications to business coaching

It is already recognised that coaching has an important role to play in managing some of the most difficult issues faced by working adults (Hall, 2015) and that it can be helpful in cases of executive derailment (Webb, 2006). For example, derailment can arise because of poor communication and interpersonal relationships. As such, it is important for executives to work effectively with senior management and build good relationships with colleagues if they are to avoid derailment. There are a number of ways that coaches can help executives to do this and to help organisations develop supportive structures (Gentry & Shanock, 2008). Coaching, therefore, has an important role to play in preventing derailment and keeping senior executives on track. However, this paper has been about intervention after derailment has happened and when coaches are employed to help the client get back on track. In this final section, I will therefore consider implications for practitioners to help clients move forward following derailment.

First, it is important to recognise that the experience of derailment may lead to reactions characteristic of PTSD. Clients must be able to manage their distress sufficiently well to engage in executive coaching, but PTSD can be a barrier to this. Clients with PTSD symptoms will likely find it difficult to engage with coaching, either because they are preoccupied with their own intrusive thoughts, avoidant of conversations that serve as traumatic reminders, or too distressed to think clearly and be in psychological contact with the coach.

For coaches, it is helpful therefore to have an understanding of the field of psychological trauma and these processes. Some coaches may be able to offer therapeutic help to people who have experienced trauma (Spence & Joseph, 2016). But most coaches are not mental health professionals and will not offer psychological help for PTSD. A knowledge of the field of psychological trauma will, however, help coaches to identify clients who are experiencing difficulties and advise them about seeking appropriate help, and allow them to liaise and dialogue with mental health professionals if needed.

Second, for those clients who are not so impaired by PTSD symptoms and are able to engage with executive coaching, understanding their intrinsic motivation towards rebuilding their shattered assumptions about themselves, their future career ambitions and their priorities in life provides coaches with a new positive psychological way of working. Instead of viewing derailment only as destructive, we can see it as the beginning of an unfolding process of how personal and professional development may arise.

Practically, the 6-step THRIVE model (Joseph, 2011) summarised below provides six signposts that categorise the activities that clients engage in as they process their experience:

- *Taking stock.* Involves tuning in to one's psychological, physical and social realities, and gathering and utilising resources that serve the person well and help to stabilise functioning. At this point the coach may decide that the client is not ready for coaching because they remain too distressed to engage with it, and would best be referred for medical advice, counselling or psychotherapy.
- *Harvesting hope.* Involves developing habits of mind that help to glimpse opportunities for growth. Clients who are in a state of distress are unlikely to be receptive to the idea that there may be positive change. As such, coaches need to be careful in how they introduce the topic. In my experience I would rarely mention it myself but be attentive to expressions of hope that come from the client. At that point it may be helpful to introduce exercises on building hope (e.g., Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015).
- *Re-authoring.* Involves the construction of new personal narratives, which include past events, and building new networks of beliefs about self, others and the world. Taking opportunities that arise to find ways to engage with the client in developing a new narrative about themselves and their place in the world that seems realistic and more aligned with their values and strengths will be helpful.
- *Identifying change.* Involves spotting moments where desired changes are present or strengths are being displayed. As clients mention changes in themselves, this is about making sure that they don't go unnoticed. The opportunity is taken by the coach to help the client notice the process of change.
- *Valuing change.* Involves placing some personal significance to the change being pursued (i.e., why it matters), which can also help to evoke the new narrative. Changes may seem trivial to the client in relation to their old worldview. For example, the workaholic who once would have seen spending more time at home and with the family as a sign of failure comes to realise that this is actually more important to them. Helping the client articulate their values is important.
- *Expressing change in action.* Involves the articulation of changes into concrete actions. For example, if the client talks about how they perceive things differently, asking them

what they can do differently as a result is helpful. Find ways to turn PTG into observable behaviours that make a difference in their world.

It is not expected that clients work through each of these signposts in sequence or that they are even aware of what they are doing. Rather their use is in alerting the coach to the client's process as they struggle towards finding new meanings and significance in their experiences. Coaches may use these six signposts as a guide for discussion or introducing relevant activities into the session.

However, while wanting to put a positive psychology lens on career derailment, this is not to deny how upsetting the experiences are for people. It is important that coaches are mindful not to create expectations for PTG in their clients (Joseph, 2011). Attempts to push the client towards new strategies for reinventing their career or finding new perspectives are likely to fail if they have not yet come to the realisation for themselves that this is their opportunity for such change. Indeed, pushing clients towards the idea of PTG before they are ready may even be counter-productive, as they may feel that their experiences are being invalidated and dismissed, and thus react to defend themselves.

It has been hypothesised, however, that people do not need to be pushed towards PTG but will move automatically in that direction within a supportive social relationship in which they do not need to defend themselves (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Seen this way, the core assumption of coaching for PTG is that the client has the resources necessary within them already (Whitmore, 1996) – an assumption familiar to many business coaches, and contemporary positive psychologists (Kauffman, Joseph, & Scoular, 2015).

We now need new research to build on the new theoretical ideas presented here in order to demonstrate the applicability of PTG to executive derailment, to understand the processes driving such change and how coaches can best facilitate PTG. Research is needed to investigate the traumatic stress reactions of those who are derailed and whether these are indeed triggers for PTG, how PTG manifests in both personal and professional ways, what factors promote and impede the development of PTG, and what coaching strategies and tactics are most effective in facilitating PTG.

Finally, coaches can play a valuable role in helping people to get themselves on a new track. Derailment experiences can become opportunities for new meaning-making, and personal and professional growth. It is now important to further understand and substantiate the application of PTG to derailment in clients.

Note

1. These are fictionalised accounts based on real cases to ensure anonymity.

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Notes on contributor



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