

Invisible Barriers

Staff

An organization I used to work with helped career oriented managers and professionals return to work. Typically our clients were older workers who had often only worked for 1 or 2 employers throughout their 20, 25 or 30+ year careers. If you were to encounter one of these people even while unemployed, you would most likely be met with a facade that represented an 'everything is okay' mentality. More often than not, this is not the case.

Typically professional experienced workers are seen as people with extensive networks, deep skill sets, and intimate knowledge of the industries from which they come. While this is true, it also often leads to the perception they need little help or do not suffer from the ill effects of unemployment. This is far from the truth.

The organization I used work for did extensive diagnostic testing with our clients to help them understand the impacts unemployment has on people. Using such diagnostics such as the 'Myers Briggs Type Indicator', 'Thoughts, Moods and Feelings', and the 'Burns Anxiety and Depression Scales', we helped clients to understand the cycle of highs and lows that most unemployed people experience, including experience, high achieving individuals.

Although I knew what kind of responses these instruments would generate from each group of talented people that came through our door, the results always surprised me. Words such as 'embarrassed', 'humiliated', and 'ashamed' were common amongst the responses. For entire careers these people had been the providers, the leaders, and the architects of their own success and after being unceremoniously ushered out the door and told they are no longer needed, many of them slip into low level depression and high levels of anxiety.

The effects on these people was predictable. At first most believe it would only be a matter of a few weeks or a month before they found work again. As days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, anxiety heightened and depression deepened. They would begin to wonder what they were doing wrong and that thought would quickly be replaced thinking that something was wrong with them. Once that mentality began to set in, they would start to apply to lower level jobs believing that they would be simple to get and provide some relief to the mounting pressure of being able to provide. Unfortunately in most cases this would become detrimental not only to their job search, but to their self confidence. Soon they being to hear phrases like 'over qualified' and 'too much experience' and the rejection letters pile up.

So when one of these individuals walks through your door, what can you do to help? The first thing to do is recognize you are dealing with someone who is facing a significant barrier to employment. Although they may not have any

visible barriers, the invisible mental barriers are often significant. Very often, helping these individuals get past these barriers is the first step to get their job search going. They may often say things like 'all I need is a little help with my resume' or 'help me dust off my interview skills', but don't be fooled.

They often believe these things to be true but it may not be what they really need. I can not count the number of times our program helped these people over come the mental barriers they faced and then sat back and watched these people take off like rockets. Very often once the mental blocks are cleared, they have the intelligence and the resources to get their own job search going again.

Unfortunately there are no quick fixes to clear these mental blocks. It is only over a period of time that these individuals begin to realize that just because someone took the job title away doesn't mean that the knowledge, skills, and experience they accumulated are still valid and are their own. It is only over a period of time that they will begin to see that hope is not lost and they are still the same person they were. They will begin to realize that even though someone took away their job title, they did not take away all the experience, knowledge and skill they built up while they worked.

One of the things you can do to help these individuals is to connect them with others who have similar backgrounds. Reminiscing, not lamenting, the good old days, helps people remember what it is they can achieve. It is often helpful to do this with other people who had the same kinds of experiences as they will help trigger forgotten achievements.

Barriers come in many forms and all need to be adequately addressed. The first step is always recognizing the barrier that exists. In some cases it is obvious but in others it is not. Be careful not to jump to the treatment without first spending some time exploring what the real difficulties may be, not just what you see at surface level.