

The Five O'Clock News[®]

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"One organization with a long record of success in helping people find jobs is The Five O'Clock Club."

FORTUNE

How to Get Fired

A Review of Smart Exit Strategies

by David Madison, Ph.D.,

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This article is based on a presentation by two of our senior certified coaches, Bill Belknap and Chip Conlin, to a training session for our National Guild of Career Coaches. Bill and Chip are members of our team of severance coaches—those to whom we refer clients who ask for advice on how to negotiate departure from a job. The meeting was held November 16, 2004 in New York City.



"I'm going to have to let you go. Even though you're one of the best computer programmers we've ever had, we just can't tolerate you eating the other employees."

Let's see, you could throw a drink in your manager's face at the company picnic. Or perhaps arrive at the office wearing your pajamas. Every morning at your desk—before taking a half-hour coffee break—you could spend a couple of hours surfing the net looking for your next vacation destination. Or during your annual review with your boss, say, "You were *serious* about all those goals for last year?" In the film *Nine to Five*, when Lily Tomlin's character thinks she's poisoned her boss (Dabney Coleman) by mistake, she laments, "I just killed the boss. You don't think they're not going to fire me for something like this?"

How do you survive with dignity and with as little damage as possible?

These are surely ways to get fired—or at least come very close. But this article isn't *really* about how to *get* fired—who needs that kind of advice? We want to review a few of the things you can do to survive the process of being fired. That is, how do you survive with dignity, and with as little damage as possible?

This clearly is a topic most of us don't even want to think about. But bear in mind that jobs don't last forever in the modern economy. A generation ago, job security was built into the system. These days, however, it's built *out* of the system. Jobs last an average of 4.5 years. *Continued on page 3*

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- ◆ Traditional Outplacement: Not in Sync



Coach Chip Conlin

That's why it's important to be very aware of career planning—and it's important to be savvy about being fired. Chances are, you will have to go through it once or twice.

Of course, employers and termination policies differ greatly. We've all heard horror stories about employees being treated like criminals when they're asked to leave. We also know that some organizations get high marks for handling people with care and sensitivity when there's a forced departure. And it's hard to know when you *take* a job how things may play out when you leave the job.

But it's also very true that employees commonly aren't as skilled as they could be in handling forced exits. There usually is a degree of trauma, confusion and anger—the latter especially, if the circumstances seem to be unfair or arbitrary. Even people who have been through this harrowing experience give far less thought to the process of *leaving* a job than getting a job. Naturally at the Five O'Clock Club we focus far more on job *search* strategies. But we encourage people to look upon being fired as a crucial time for self-protection instincts and strategies to kick in. Being fired may be inevitable now and then, but you don't necessarily have to take it lying down—as in, *being run over*.

Circumstances will vary enormously, but we're going to review a few key principles to bear in mind. Some of these may apply to your situation, others may not, but keep this list on file to review if it happens to you.

Being fired may be inevitable, but you don't have to be run over.

Find a Coach

Why try to fly solo through an experience that has the potential to cause you

damage and loss? Getting good advice can save you a lot of grief.

There are coaches who have helped hundreds of people go through this—and their words of wisdom and emotional support can be invaluable. The rate for such coaching is usually in the \$125 to \$150 per hour range, but the return on investment can be huge. The strategies, suggestions and scripts offered by a coach could mean that you will walk away with a few thousand dollars more or a few more months of insurance coverage—as well as other substantial advantages. After just a few minutes into a conversation with a coach you may find yourself saying, "Gee, I never thought of that." It's the things you don't think of that can mean big trouble.

At the end of this article we will return to the topic of getting help—in the form of employer-paid outplacement services.

Panic will work against making the best of a bad situation.

Distance Yourself from the Emotions of the Situation

Depending on your temperament, you might react smoothly or hysterically, or anything in between, when you hear the words "you're fired" — even if it's not put that bluntly. But most people can assume that their judgment *will be clouded* when they get the word that their job is over. By all means, avoid making decisions or *signing anything* until you've had time to distance yourself from your first reactions.

One of the most difficult emotions to handle is *panic*, because job loss may feel like the end of the world... if you haven't looked for a job in ages, if you live from paycheck to paycheck, or if your plate is already full with personal problems at home. *But panic will work against making the best of a bad situation.* Simply reviewing the other points to follow in this article can help you see that there are constructive steps to take—and the situation probably is not as bleak as it may seem.

There may be a lot of anger, too. One Five O'Clock Club client was so

filled with rage when she was fired that she couldn't even bear to meet with her boss to work out severance. With the help of her coach she crafted carefully worded emails to present her case—that is, she made sure that her rage and anger didn't come through in what she wrote. In this way she doubled the payout that the company had originally offered. If you try to negotiate from anger, you're probably building toward a lose-lose situation for everyone. Which brings us to the next point.

Try to Be as Non-Confrontational as Possible

One of the most natural reactions to being fired is one variation or another of, "After all I've done for this company..." Almost everyone—on one level or another—wants to think that he or she has done a good job, and doesn't deserve to be fired. Even if an employee is being terminated for performance reasons, there is likely to be disagreement with the boss on the quality of the job done. But it is usually pointless to try to argue your case. For every wonderful accomplishment you can claim, your manager is likely to counter with an example of something you failed to do or how you fell short. An argument about performance is the last thing that will advance your case at this point.

Most employers want to make a graceful exit.

Believe it or not, most employers want to make the exit *as graceful as possible*—to keep stress as low as possible for all parties concerned, and to protect the reputation of the organization.

So just accept the fact there will probably not be agreement on whether or not you deserve the forced exit, and focus on negotiating as calmly and pleasantly as possible. As much as anything, a feeling of goodwill (even if it seems strained and



Coach Bill Belknap

artificial!) increases the chances of arriving at a win-win solution. You are vulnerable to damage in these situations, and you want to minimize damage as much as possible.

So how good are you at *making nice*?

Negotiate calmly and pleasantly. A feeling of goodwill increases the chances of arriving at a win-win solution.

Sharpen Your Acting Skills

At Five O'Clock Club we tell job-hunters that interviewing is *showtime*. Even if you don't feel confident and on top of the world, try to act as if you do. Performance is half the battle in landing a job offer. The same advice applies when you're presenting your case for the best possible exit package. Of course you need to huddle with your coach to plot strategy, perfect your script and note all the points that need to be covered. Have your list of needs and desires (not demands!) and focus on the realities of your situation and the job market. We prod job hunters to perfect their Two-Minute Pitches, and you need a variation of this for the meetings with your boss or HR manager to discuss the terms of your departure. Rehearse it with family members and your coach. This is meant to be a framework for your presentation, but you will *act the part* when the time comes if you can remember to talk from the heart. If you have firmly in mind the reasons why the package you want makes sense, it will be easier to do that.

It's Not a Done Deal Until It Is Signed: Gear Up to Negotiate and Influence

Being an employee usually means being in a position of minor or inferior power—in comparison to the corporation or boss. The feeling of having power stacked against you usually is intensified by being forced out of a job. It's very common to

feel that you're in a take-it-or-leave-it situation. But you'd be surprised how many people get more by *asking* for more—and by simply being *persistent* about it. The Five O'Clock Club mantra for finessing salary negotiations—that is, keeping negotiations going while building the case that you're the best person for the job — is, "You're a fair person, I'm a fair person."

That can be your opening volley every time you come back to your employer to try to get more. Most employers assume that people will just go away when the terms of separation have been announced; after all, who (supposedly) holds all the power? But you can come back with reasoned arguments about why the package isn't all that it should be. To put it bluntly, this can be a matter of guts. How often are you willing to go back to the table? They think they've gotten rid of you, but you refuse to go quietly: "I'm a fair person, you're a fair person, and here's what's fair." Don't forget that things don't have to be rushed. By law you usually have 21 days to work out an agreement.

Clearly, if you happen to be part of a massive layoff of dozens or hundreds of people, there may be little room for you to maneuver—company policy that applies to everyone may appear to be written in stone. But can you make the case that your situation is unique? Have you been on payroll only a short time, after

being recruited away from a ten or fifteen year job somewhere else? Did you relocate from a great distance to join the company? Did you play a key role in a major project? Your career coach can help you build the case that you deserve more than is being offered. It may also be good strategy to find allies within the company who are willing to remind management of your contributions and accomplishments—especially if a manager or boss is losing you because of a merger or reorganization. Now is a good time to call in the favors that people may owe you.

Go into negotiations with a firm idea of your priorities—and have the numbers carefully worked out. "I want to remain whole" is a strong argument to make with fair-minded people as you initiate negotiations. That is, as you transition to a new job (and you usually have no idea how long that may take), you don't want your finances or family life to take a hit. Hence, you should know all of the numbers, and be prepared to discuss items in order of priority, e.g., severance, health insurance coverage, unpaid vacation days, the laptop you'd like to take with you.

When to Get the Ball Rolling Yourself—Without Quitting

It's not uncommon for people to see the handwriting on the wall. Perhaps there's a new boss, or a change in management in general. Or the newspapers may be full of stories about an upcoming merger that will impact your company—so it's no secret that jobs will be cut. For a variety of other reasons you may sense that your days on the job may be numbered; you might have been on put on warning for failing to meet goals, mastering a new process or procedure—or even fitting in with the corporate culture. In such cases the daily mood at work can be strained; if you sense that you're just marking time, it might be appropriate to be *proactive*. The boss or manager might be relieved to hear that you're looking for a separation that will make everyone happy. Some of the possible scripts:

- "Janet, you know this is not working, I know it's not working. Why



"I know you've been waiting for that promotion to V. P., Roberts, but I've decided to give it to my son Timmy. You understand, don't you?"

don't we work something out?"

- "Tom, after really thinking about this situation, I'm afraid that I won't be able to meet these expectations. I'd like to work something out that makes sense for both of us."
- "John, this is not the job we initially discussed. I'm not as motivated as I thought I would be—maybe we'd better discuss how to bring this to a conclusion."

Obviously situations and reasons differ enormously, but if you've arrived at the point of hating to get up and go to work every day, it may be time to maneuver an exit, without quitting. Resigning because you hate your job can be a very risky strategy—in fact if it's not thought out carefully, it's an impulse, not a strategy. This article is aimed at helping you be fired—and working that process to your advantage. Unless you have solid backup plans A, B & C (which include, for example, money in the bank and the means to provide health insurance), quitting is not really an option.

Resigning because you hate your job is an impulse, not a strategy.

The scripts suggested above should be tried only after gauging the political situation at work, which means talking to trusted coworkers to get a reading on how the powers-that-be react to employees who ask for exit packages. Chances are, these waters are not entirely uncharted, and finding out about company history can be useful. *And absolutely nothing of this sort should be attempted without talking with your career coach.*

Get a Written Statement

At the Five O'Clock Club we advise job-hunters to *get good at explaining* why they left their last jobs. Anyone who asks you on a job interview why you left your last job doesn't really want too much information—in the sense of "all the gory details," if this includes a detailed account of why things didn't work out in your last position. Interviewers

want a brief explanation that makes sense and reflects well on you. They don't expect you to give them names of people (as references) who are going to say bad things about you. They expect to hear good things about you. That's why it's important to build a list of former bosses and colleagues who will sing your praises.

And part of a good exit strategy is to get something in writing. Especially if you're leaving a job for performance reasons, or because the job turned out not to be a good fit, it's wise to get a written statement that accentuates the positives that you brought to the job. Even if your employer doesn't want to write a glowing recommendation, negotiate a statement that will help satisfy curiosity in a positive way about why and how you left the job.

A lawsuit will divert you from your job search.

You can show this document to the people you have asked to be your references. That will help them say the right things when people call them to ask about your personality, reputation and work history. Of course, if you're student of the Five O'Clock Club methodology, you know that your references should be thoroughly briefed about each job you're a finalist for—so that they can better

describe you in terms of the position.

A letter of recommendation or reference from your employer should be kept on file permanently. Ten or fifteen years from now, it may be impossible to find former bosses and managers, so the letter can substitute for talking to the people who have disappeared.

To Sue or Not to Sue: When to Call a Lawyer

Americans are fond of saying—especially when something really wrong or unfair has happened—"I'll take it all the way to the Supreme Court." But, in fact, the period of transitioning from one job to another is probably the worst time to be involved in a lawsuit. It can be very expensive and time consuming—and will divert you from the very thing you should focus on the most, namely, your job search (a full-time job search requires 35 hours a week). Besides, the last thing you want prospective employers to find out is that you're suing your former company. The suspicion is that something went terribly wrong, and you are suspected of being a litigious person. So the impulse to sue should be treated like most other impulses: forget about it. Or at least wait until the impulse has cooled, and *you've thought about it a lot*, before taking action.

That having been said, there may be reasons to consult with your attorney during the exit process. If there is genuinely an issue relating to discrimination or criminal behavior that brought about your dismissal, you may be justified in seeking legal action. Consultation with your lawyer could reveal how strong a case you may have. Of course, the potential benefits of suing would have to far outweigh the aggravation you would have to endure. And what would be the purpose of suing? To get your job back? That would be a good idea only in very rare circumstances.

As you review all of the issues relating to your termination with your career coach, the latter will clearly point out when a matter requiring legal advice comes up. Career coaches are not lawyers and don't have the expertise you need for such issues.



"Johnson, if you're going to have negative thoughts, I suggest you get rid of that thought balloon!"

One of the areas for consulting an attorney is non-compete agreements. Most of these are usually imbedded in the hiring agreements that may have been signed months or years ago, but, especially when you lose your job against your will, your employer might be at a disadvantage in trying to enforce a non-compete. You may be able to have a non-compete renegotiated—with the help of your lawyer—when you're settling all the matters relating to your departure.

Getting Your Next Job Soon: The Value of Outplacement

Career coaching that is provided by your employer when you're let go (that is, you don't pay for it) is known as outplacement. Some companies offer this service, others don't—it's a matter of finances and *attitude*. Once when we made a presentation to an HR officer about Five O'Clock Club outplacement, we stressed that our program (a full year of coaching help) is a way of demonstrating that a company cares. We were shocked to be told bluntly, "But we *don't* care." This level of insensitivity is rare, and you should include outplacement on your list of requests as you negotiate an exit. Even if you work for a company known for its heartlessness, you should make the case for getting outplacement help.

Anyone who asks why you left your last job doesn't really want too much information.

The primary reason for doing this is that people who get job-search coaching *land better jobs faster*. There's really no mystery about this: most people are not experts on how to find a job. Even people who have found themselves out of a job several times in their careers say, "Oh no, not again"—because it is stressful and always presents new challenges. There's a lot of conventional job-hunt wisdom floating around—most of it wrong—and if you follow it, you're likely to get stalled or delayed on the way to your next job. Working with a coach means that you can avoid making costly mistakes; coaches have guided hun-

dreds of people through the process and can offer invaluable guidance. Asking your employer for this kind of service is a way to give yourself a boost—which you will come to fully appreciate in the weeks and months ahead.

But what about money instead? Your employer may say, "Here's three months' severance and outplacement service OR four months' severance. Which do you want?" Most employers are astute enough *not* to offer this option, because the impulse of most people is to say, "Show me the money!" But turning your back on job-search help is simply not a smart move—it could very well translate into several more months of unemployment...which means you've *lost* money.

Turning your back on job-search help is simply not a smart move.

A cushion of money is nice, of course, and who doesn't want the cushion of money to be as big as possible? Ironically, a large cushion of money can work against you: "Wow—I've got six months' severance, I can give myself a break and coast for a while." Many times people have arrived at the Five O'Clock Club in a panic: "I'm just about out of money: I've got to find a job *fast*." And it turns out that a big severance package is just about exhausted, and the person had been job-hunting half-heartedly; the extra cash had bred complacency and procrastination. It's very hard to get geared up for the hard work of job search if you've just been coasting for a while. Chances are, if you get signed up for outplacement, your coach will prod you out of the coasting mode as soon as possible (at least that's the way we do it at the Five O'Clock Club). Our research shows that people who don't get started on job search *right away* lose momentum, and end up with much longer searches. Getting outplacement service as part of your exit package is one of the best ways to shorten your between jobs status.

For full information about Five O'Clock Club outplacement services, see pages 9 to 15 of this issue, visit our website or call the home office, 212-286-9332. ●

The Job-Search Buddy System

Do you wish you had someone to talk to—fairly often and informally—about the little things? "Here's what I'm planning to do today in my search? What are *you* planning to do? Let's talk tomorrow to make sure we've done it." You and your job-search buddy could keep each other positive and on track, and encourage each other to do what you told the small group you were going to do: Make that call, send out those letters, write that follow-up proposal, focus on the most important things that should be done—rather than (for example) spending endless hours responding to job postings on the Web.

With your buddy, practice your Two-Minute Pitch, get ready for interviews, bounce ideas off each other. Some job-search buddies talk every day. Some talk a few times a week. Most of the conversation is by phone and e-mail.

Sometimes, people match themselves up as buddies. Just pick someone you get along with in your small group. Sometimes, your coach can match you up. However you do it, stay away from negative people who talk about how bad it is out there. They will drag you down.

The small group changes over time: people get jobs; new people come in. If you lose one buddy who got a job, get another buddy.

Your buddy does not have to be in your field or industry. In fact, being in the same field or industry could keep you focused on the industry rather than on the *process*. But you *do* have to get along! The relationship may last only a month or two, or go on for years. Some buddies become friends.

Of course, you should see your Five O'Clock Club career coach *privately* for résumé review, target development, salary negotiation, and job interview follow-up. It's usually best to get professional coaching advice for these areas. ●

