

Chapter 2

Three Executive Obstacles to Job Search

Secret: The very executive habits that create work success can spell job search failure.

Craig is a superstar CEO: a corporate wunderkind with an Ivy League pedigree who achieved major success in two very different industries by age 30. He is a Wall Street legend, the subject of a Harvard Business School case, a corporate executive, an investment banker, and an entrepreneur. The common theme in his career has been reinventing businesses—and success after success.

By his mid-50s, he'd sold a major business and was looking for his next career, afraid the best was behind him. Having exceeded most people's dreams of success, recognition, wealth, and power, he nevertheless worried about the future. He wanted to be in the middle of the fray, leading a major arts center or governmental agency, not in the peripheral role of board member.

Many executives would be thrilled to have achieved what Craig had and be content to rest on their laurels. But Craig, ever the achiever, was restless and dissatisfied. Instead of searching for the perfect job for himself, he was waiting for someone to find him for the perfect job. Though he was too proud to admit to frustration, he was clearly unhappy because he had so much to contribute and no one was extending offers to him.

This uncharacteristically passive approach to his career was based on a mistaken assumption about how career moves happen.

Craig figured that his impressive reputation and contacts would lead others to him. He was waiting to be found and asked. But reputation and contacts do not guarantee a great new role, especially if the sought-after new role represents a marked shift in direction.

Craig needed to put himself back in the game, as he had always done in the past, instead of waiting to be asked to join. He didn't want to be relegated to the sidelines, but he didn't know what to do or where to go. And he was laboring under another common misconception: that a person gets one big chance at success and he had already had his.

Complicating matters, some of the things that made him an effective CEO made it more difficult to find new career inspiration. He was used to reasoning his way quickly out of situations and taking quick and decisive action. He was used to being smarter than anyone else, which made it hard to listen to advice. He was also used to being the expert and intimidating others into silence. He was unwilling or unable to ask for help.

Three Obstacles to Inspiring Possibilities

Craig's story illustrates three common obstacles faced by executives: *knowing it all*, *instant answers*, and *invulnerability*. Executives are used to having the answers, figuring things out themselves, and taking action—all impediments to finding inspiring work.

Let's dispense quickly with all three:

1. *The obstacle of knowing it all*: You don't know it all even if you're smarter and more successful than other people. If you did, you wouldn't be dissatisfied with where you are. If it were so easy to find inspiring work, everyone would love his or her job, and people like me wouldn't be in business. There's no shame in not knowing everything. Giving yourself permission to not know it all frees you to ask questions and find answers that can guide you toward inspiring work.

2. *The obstacle of instant answers*: Finding a career possibility that inspires takes reflection and takes time. Applying the can-do

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and fast approach you use with other problems won't work here. Too many executives operate under the misguided notion that inspiring work is the result of revelation, a blinding and instant knowledge of your life's purpose.

This notion fits nicely with executives' self-concept as people who make things happen fast. Finding an inspiring life purpose is almost always the result of the gradual accumulation of information through self-exploration. If you're waiting for a revelation, you're likely to be waiting a long, long time—maybe forever. This book breaks the necessary reflection and exploration into bite-size pieces, so you can develop insights and momentum in the process while maintaining a demanding schedule and job.

3. *The obstacle of invulnerability*: No one is invulnerable, but executives often forget this is so. Equating invulnerability with strength and leadership, and vulnerability with weakness, perpetuates the appearance of strength. While it may protect you from those you believe would take advantage of you, it also locks you in a box the size of your current insights and knowledge.

The illusion of invulnerability can keep you from work you love, by depriving you of honest feedback and useful two-way communication. If you can't look to others for assistance, you're apt to stay stuck.

The inability to ask for help is one of the most career-threatening mistakes executives make. Take this opportunity to experience the paradox of the strength that comes from acknowledging limitation. Finding and realizing your greatest career possibility is more than a one-person job. What's it going to be: your pride or your happiness?

Craig's discomfort with listening instead of leading conversations and his resistance to feedback were an open secret. His colleagues and subordinates, even his friends did not dare say it to him. The need to seem self-sufficient and indomitable kept others at a distance and a new career out of reach. What's so unfortunate is that when his dream job materialized, he was unprepared to take the necessary steps, such as letting the search committee or influential

contacts know of his interest and availability. As experienced and accomplished as he was and is, his dream job slipped through his fingers.

Characteristic executive habits of thought and style can interfere with your job search. Recognizing the need to learn how to make career moves is essential to a successful job search. Similarly, the habit of expecting instant answers at work doesn't lend itself to the thoughtful exploration required of career or job change. And the belief in personal invulnerability flies in the face of securing the necessary help to create change outside your area of expertise. Start the process by letting go of these counterproductive habits.