

Learning Tree Management Insights

Expert Advice from Today's Top Professionals

Four Tactics for Managing Yourself in Tough Times

– Anita Caputo, author & management instructor

There are many factors that can contribute to a stressful work environment, from a poor manager to the pressure and uncertainty of difficult economic times. When you stop caring about your work and stress becomes your constant companion, it's time to take action. The following article outlines four tactics to help you regain control and learn to manage yourself in tough times.

There was a time when Alex felt on top of the world. She loved her job, everything was going well and life was good. She felt invincible. Then things started to change at work.

The unraveling of Alex's work life started when her very competent and respected manager left for an exciting new opportunity with another organization. When their new manager, Terry, came on board Alex didn't know what to expect. As it turned out, Terry was a visionary—someone who sees beyond simple business solutions and outcomes. The problem was: Terry's resoluteness to his vision and his way of doing things caused resentment in the team. They felt controlled and stifled. Most members of the team, including Alex, stopped caring about Terry's vision, which resulted in an unwillingness to cooperate or do a good job.

Then economic conditions worsened and the company increased pressure to improve financial results. When executives called for belt-tightening, Terry began to trim the budget and "clean house." At first, there was some optimism when a team member who had needed to go for a long time was laid-off. But then well-respected colleagues, some of them Alex's good friends, were also laid-off. Now Alex and her team started worrying about their own jobs.

Alex started to have fleeting moments of panic: "Are they planning to lay me off? How will I pay my bills? I need this job to pay my mortgage and car loan. What will I do? I love my work. I'll never find another job like this." But at other times she found herself dreaming: "If I get laid-off, I'll be free of this place! What a relief. I'll get a severance package, and if I get another job right away, I can buy that new car that I always wanted!"

As Alex's friend, I pointed out that she couldn't change the circumstances, but she could control her reaction to them. I counseled Alex that she needed to tap into her personal power by being proactive rather than reactive. As we talked, Alex realized that she could gain a sense of control by empowering herself: she had the power to choose whether she was going to be in the driver's seat or the passenger seat on the road ahead.

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The first action step was to catch herself whenever she started thinking negative, self-limiting thoughts and focus on the positive. Confidence that she could make a difference in her own life would free her creatively and allow her to devise ways in which she could contribute to creating a better workplace with her current organization or with another organization. Positive contributions would make her a more valued, engaged employee while also positioning Alex to move on to the next job, if necessary.

The feeling of uncertainty at her job didn't change, but Alex did. By taking action to make herself a more valuable member of the team, including bringing some new skills to her job, Alex felt in control of her life again. And with that, the stress in her life stopped controlling her.

Four Tactics for Managing Yourself During Tough Times

1. Relieve stress and get inspired.

It's difficult to be positive when negativity has a hold on you. Have you ever hit a wet tennis ball? It bounces lifelessly and dies on the tarmac. A dry tennis ball, on the other hand, immediately bounces with spunk when it hits the tarmac. To help you bounce quickly, you need to take action to relieve stress and gain inspiration. There are many different options, depending on what motivates you.

For stress relief, if you draw energy from social interactions, try meeting with friends. If it's solitude that recharges your batteries, spend time alone in a special place. If physical activities are an integral part of your life, then find a new sporting activity. If you have a favorite place to which you haven't returned to for awhile, now might be the time. The key to escaping negative situations is to recognize what moves you and build on that to re-energize and gain positive momentum.

2. Surround yourself with positive people.

You'll also need someone to talk to, someone who understands your situation and cares about it and you. The most difficult part of going through tough times is the uncertainty. Dwelling on the uncertainty and focusing on the "what if's?" only serves to squelch your spirits and bring you down. Find someone who listens well and provides empathy, someone who will help you release the negative emotions that are gripping you. In addition to a sounding board, find positive people who will encourage you and challenge you to keep moving forward, despite adversity. If no one comes to mind, check the employee-assistance programs available to you (both inside and outside the company).

3. Maintain perspective and grow.

Once you start actively dealing with the negativity, you can start looking for the upside of the situation: opportunities for growth. If you've ever thought of taking a course or trying a different career, now is the time. While this is an area where you can't take advice from others, you can ask others for useful input: what they see as your strengths, what they like about working with you, what they think your perfect job would be. Build on that. Learning more about yourself will both energize you and propel you into the future.

There is opportunity in every challenge. The key here is to focus on the possibilities. What changes are you capable of? What changes can you make in your job? Brainstorm with positive, like-minded colleagues for even greater opportunities.

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4. Be prepared to stay... and be prepared to go.

It is much cheaper for an organization to keep their existing employees. Under what circumstances would your manager love to keep you? If your boss had to choose to keep you or your colleague, why would they choose you? Create win-win situations by volunteering to take on assignments that add value to the organization while simultaneously developing your career in a way that makes you more marketable.

But you should also prepare to move on and start the job search. You can stay in the driver's seat by networking—learning about opportunities in your market and getting your résumé in order. You can also gain peace of mind by getting your financial affairs in order. Doing the analysis, creating a plan, and knowing you can live with less will help put your mind at ease and allow you to concentrate on moving forward.



About the Author

Anita Caputo is an expert in authentic management and work-change resilience. She focuses on solving real business dilemmas with common sense “how-to” strategies. She is author of “Promote Yourself” and co-author of “Learn to Bounce: from a high-tech layoff to your ideal work.” She is also a management instructor at Learning Tree and teaches Course 290, “Management Skills;” Course 3405, “Developing Your Leadership Voice;” Course 222, “Leadership Skills: Success through Teamwork;” and Course 902, “IT Relationship Management.” You may contact Anita via email at: anita@bigpictureinstitute.com.