

# OPENERS

## PREOCCUPATIONS

### You're Scared. But Don't Shift Into Reverse.

By PROMISE PHELON

**I**f you haven't lost your job, you probably know someone who has. At the very least, you know someone hovering on the edge between employment and uncertainty. My in-box is filled with frantic notes, résumés and networking requests from contacts and strangers, many formerly in high-level positions.

Unfortunately, when our careers hit a road bump or when we fear turbulence ahead, we tend to act in ways that may harm us in the long run. Some of us might be swayed by job opportunities outside our expertise or below what we're capable of — anything to keep those paychecks coming.

The trouble is, when we make moves based on fear or desperation, we often become mired in jobs we never wanted. Sometimes our careers even go backward, undoing much of our hard work to lay a foundation for professional success.

I fell into that trap early in my career. I had a job I loved, running a customer-oriented group at a large technology firm. But whispers of layoffs and downsizing were in the air. And even though people I trusted warned me against it, I moved back to product marketing, the department at the company where I had worked previously, because I thought a job there would be more defensible.

At the time, I thought job stability was more important than anything else. As a result, I spent nine months working myself to the bone with little to show for it. I had zero time to network or to cultivate long-term relationships. That stint turned out to be one of my worst professional experiences. I think that my career actually took two steps backward.

It's easy for mistakes like this to happen when we're scared. We take jobs or opportunities that are unsuited to us. Then we tend to work harder just to keep that wrong, safe position, which leaves no time to cultivate our networks.

A friend of a friend just learned that her firm was planning to lay off 20 percent of its work force. I asked her what she planned to

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PETER DASILVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Promise Phelon, center, the head of UpMo, an online career planning service, with Suraj Dasika, left, engineering director, and Vince Gabrielsen, the senior engineer.

do. She said she'd have to wait and see, not thinking specifically about what she could do in the organization to save her job or how she could start networking to land a new and better opportunity.

The wait-and-see approach is like playing the lottery: hang on to your ticket and hope you get lucky. But by the time you're desperate, your downsized colleagues will already have flooded the job market, making your search that much harder.

If you are worried about being laid off, it's best to act before the ax falls. Identify where you want to land for the long term, then outline the steps that will take you there. Identify a role model who is or has been where you want to be. Then examine the course he or she took to arrive at that destination and set yours accordingly. Develop a channel of relationships built on mutual trust, so opportunities can find you.

Don't network superficially, by trying to be introduced to a stranger before selling him or her on your abilities. Instead, nurture valuable relationships over months, not days or weeks, so you'll have an enduring trusted circle that will willingly come to your aid whenever you may need it.

At the same time, avoid the treadmill strategy. That's when we get caught up in the busywork of setting up a meeting for the

sake of a meeting and haphazardly sending out résumés. You need to be clear about the people you want to contact and what value you can create for them, or none of your networking efforts will produce results.

I recently sat down for a breakfast meeting with a guy who'd been dying to meet with me for months. Basically, he spent the entire time telling me how he wanted to do a consulting project for my company, how much it would cost and when he could start.

Yet the only currency he had with me going in was his relationship with the person who connected us. To be nice, I talked with him and said, "Great, I'll consider this," but I didn't end up hiring him. What went wrong? He thought that because he had been introduced to me through his network, he wouldn't have to go through the essential long-term process of building a relationship.

**I**n this down economy, whether you've lost a job, fear losing a job or have taken a position that's not a great fit, remember that it's time to start sharpening your career strategy. Double whatever time you're spending on your quality networking, or triple it if your network is nothing more than a gaggle of LinkedIn connections or Facebook friends.

Without my network, I never would have made the leap from corporate office dweller to entrepreneur. Your network — cultivated correctly over time — can do the same for you in any economy. □