

---

**Michael J. Weatherley**

## **UNEMPLOYMENT, DECISION MAKING AND BEING A HELPER**

---

*Michael Weatherley is a Senior Lecturer at Buckinghamshire College of Higher Education, where he provides part of the helping service to Unemployed Managers, and is also currently researching into their problems. While the ideas presented here relate to how individuals facing unemployment can be helped to handle the crisis Michael feels, from experience with, for instance the bereaved, that the same process can be applied to other crises. It is an attempt to describe an holistic approach to practical help in which specific techniques have a place.*

### **Introduction**

A central issue facing anyone in a crisis is how to deal with practical decisions. It might be expected that a manager whose life is about making decisions, would be better equipped than most to deal with the decisions that have to be made in the crisis of unemployment. For many this is probably true, although we cannot be certain because these people do not come forward.

The issues on which decisions are needed would appear to be much the same for all groups of mature unemployed, but this description will be based on some experiences with unemployed managers. These people would seem to need help in 5 areas:

- Decision making techniques
- Providing help of one kind or another
- Locating sources of help
- Resolving personal issues
- Making job and career decisions

This dissection is in no sense a hierarchy, nor a group of non-connected activities.

### **Decision Making Techniques**

The experience of being made unemployed, however often it happens to someone, is always a distressing episode. One lady who joined our programme had returned from her holiday and reported to work

at quarter to nine. At five past nine she was summoned to her boss' office, and at half past she was out on the street with her terminal payment, cards and her personal belongings. For the next two days she wandered the streets dazed and uncomprehending, until by chance she walked into college, and was directed by the porters to the room where our Job Help programme was taking place. There was no way in which she could have been expected to make the rational decisions about her future. She needed to find emotional support to get her through the immediate crisis. Other unemployed people, in this instance programme participants, were able to do this more effectively than any other group of people. While this is an extreme case, to a greater or lesser extent, all who are unemployed suffer this dazed loss of contact with life. The need to succour the individual is paramount at this stage.

Like many people coming upon the experience of unemployment this lady was uncertain as to where she wanted to go, and what she had to offer. It is difficult to recall all the things that we have done in our lives, and more particularly those things at which we were good and enjoyed doing. Decisions must be based on sound understanding of the facts, including the emotional facts; in unemployment the first group of facts are about one's self. At a mundane level it may also be necessary to find data to impress future employers, or to make a case for re-training. In making that case we will have to marshal the facts accurately. Whether we are convincing a future boss, a training establishment or planning the future for ourselves, we will need to have that data assembled and organised. This dispassionate approach to the handling of the data about oneself is the first step in the Decision Making Process.

The manner in which the material is collected is probably immaterial, but it is essentially a two step activity. The first step is just about collecting data. The second step is more difficult, and that is to interpret what the data means without emotional overtones of coyness or boasting. We have tended to call the outcome of this data collecting and interpreting activity "The Database". There must be many ways of doing this, not just the process we have evolved.

The value of the Database may vary according to the situation in which it is being used. It is not unknown for the act of collecting the data to trigger off the whole response to handling the crisis. One redundant manager had earlier moved to the High Wycombe area because he thought the job prospects would be better. Before he was half way through the exercise he had come to the realisation with his wife that they would not be happy until they had returned to their home locality in the West Country.

This process of collecting and collating data has a valuable contribution to make in the establishment of Aims and Objectives. It is not uncommon to hear of men who have drifted to a level of some eminence before redundancy strikes. A not uncommon story is of the fitter demobbed from servicing Lancasters in 1945 having a job found for him by relatives, and since then working his way to Production Director. He hasn't been actively unhappy, but he never wanted to be an engineer. His initial reaction is to seek to continue down the line his life has been taking him for the last 37 years. Digging into his background while establishing a Database re-awakens old dreams. Women coming back into employment, or sometimes having returned to work in a mundane job are now seeking to upgrade themselves into a more challenging activity than the clerical work they usually get offered. The individual first discovers what he does not want, then needs to define what is desired, to set himself Aims and Objectives. A solicitor who was advised to give up his practice on medical grounds had to face this challenge. His aim was to develop a life which reduced Stress. He moved out of a city centre into a country district. Looking at his previous activities he felt he could be a craftsman potter, and supplement this with some degree of self-sufficiency. His aims were to be potter-trained within a year and to be financially self-supporting within a further two years. In fact he achieved this latter objective within the first year he had allowed. This rather mechanical approach is preferred by many of the unemployed managers because it presents them with a structure within which they are happy to operate. The format of the structure is probably unimportant. It must provide the individual with a congenial framework.

It is often difficult in our own lives to separate the urgency of a situation from the importance. We may be able to see this in relation to tasks at work, but it is often difficult because of the emotional overtones when applied to our own life. One highly competent and well qualified Civil Engineer was making heavy weather of establishing his future career. He wanted to return to his work on the Hong Kong Mass Transit project. His wife wanted to remain in the U.K. This was an important issue in their lives. The important problem was that their marriage had died on them, and the question of where he would work was but one symptom. It became acutely urgent when the lady whom he referred to as "My Susie Wong" phoned him from Heathrow.

### **Types of Help**

For the outsider these problems may seem to have obvious solutions. The first step in providing help is to listen. The longer the individual

has been stewing over the problems that unemployment has exposed, the more important this is. The problem may be very deep rooted, and have been put to one side for years. In one company where redundancy affected 60 or so managers and executives, the Company Secretary was persistently unavailable. He was both well liked, and highly regarded by his colleagues. "John is always in before anyone else in the morning, and will often stay until gone 10 at night". When he came to dinner with the Redundancy Counsellor, the real problem, his wife's chronic alcoholism, was revealed. He had been avoiding facing up to it for over ten years. It had now become an urgent area for decision. It had always been important, but he had suppressed the importance by being busy. More significantly it had not been something he could discuss with his colleagues. An hour's listening had allowed him to state, and later put into train, the options open to him.

Listening will reveal that there are perhaps three activities in which the tutor can engage with the participant. These are counselling, coaching and advice. Advice is the easiest provision to make and is probably the most overused. It is telling the participant what the facts are and hence what it is that he should do. There are over 60 cash benefits to which he, or his family, may have become eligible from DHSS alone. He may need to be given advice about how to tackle an Industrial Tribunal over a case of wrongful dismissal. These are all straight forward factual issues amenable to advice.

Coaching is about the skills that the individual should be displaying. Coaching a small group in the skills of being an interviewee is an obvious example. This is probably the most widely requested skill, but coaching in CV and letter writing skills is also needed. There is a need for the mature and experienced manager to develop a CV which bears the mark of his personality as well as covering the facts in an appetising manner.

Counselling is much more about the inner life and the difficulties the respondent is undergoing. The role of the counsellor is to help the counsellee recognise the strands that are relevant to his life and to help interpret them. Our Civil Engineer is a case where this was relevant. He had thought that he only needed some advice on where to send his CV and some coaching on how to improve it. The recognition of the inner turmoil which was destroying him came bursting in on him when "Susie Wong" phoned.

The role that the helper may be playing at any one time will switch with some rapidity. In a single session he will be advisor, coach and counsellor, and he has to be sensitive to the appropriate role.

### **Locating Sources of Help**

The biggest help that the individual can have in making decisions about a new career, is his own self-confidence. The work of advice, coaching and counselling must relate to this.

The support of the "family" is the biggest single factor in a man's self-confidence. It could be that our Civil Engineer became successful because he switched allegiance from his non-supporting wife to his supportive "Susie Wong". This change is often more marked in women who have been put on the job market through the death of a husband, or following a messy divorce. They seem to feel they are "un-persons". The support of a group in helping them establish a role in the group, will help them perceive a bigger role for themselves within the world. It is unlikely that the helper on his own will be able to establish the new self-confidence. In the end it is the group support that will allow the whole unfettered personality to blossom again.

Unemployment is not a happy situation. It breaks up marriages. It causes placid men to beat their wives. It makes strong men turn to suicide. Anyone who is involved in helping will need to be aware that sooner or later he is going to get involved in marital disputes, he is going to have an attempted suicide, and so on. He may decide to handle each episode himself, but he will also need to be able to contact the appropriate helping bodies, both in the public sector, such as the Social Services Department, and in the private sector, such as the local branch of the Samaritans. It would be unwise of the helper not to have available one or two colleagues with whom he can discuss difficult cases.

### **Resolving Personal Issues**

The average person has a poorly structured image of his own personal life and background. Until faced with the need to develop a new future it is unlikely that he gives it much thought. The home and the family for most men is a nice cosy place to which they can retreat at the end of the working day, while for the married woman tied to the housekeeping (and for all I know all women) it is a place that they labour to make congenial for those who regularly use it. Most of us carry around with us a glamourised self-image in which we never

age. He is no longer the glamorous, swift, wing three-quarter running in the winning try for Harlequins in the Middlesex Sevens. He is a chubby 45 year old who gets breathless putting on his seat belt each morning. Until he comes to terms with the unpleasant facts of mortality he is unlikely to make good decisions. One of the virtues of building a structured Database is that it rapidly brings to the individual's attention the detail of his domestic life. A very senior official had his job wiped out in a three sentence statement in the House of Commons. He was too senior to be transferred to another Department. He came to us determined to find another job. He thought that his pension, his golden handshake and his investments made it imperative that he earned at a high level. He was a very young 51 years old. In looking at his personal circumstances he found that he could say nothing about either of his two sons, now both married and in their mid-twenties. He couldn't say what his wife did with her time, or what her interests were, or why she stayed with him. He returned from his residential course to discover that his wife only intended to stay with him until he was back in work. Tough man that he was, he decided to change dramatically. Three years later we heard from him again. His marriage was more successful than it had ever been, he had discovered that he had delightful daughters-in-law, and that his sons were excellent adult company. He had given up all thought of employment; he was busy with all sorts of unpaid work in the community in which he lived.

For other people the decision may require that they undergo some form of training. The solicitor, whose move to being a potter has been described earlier, had to make some very positive decisions in relation to his future. He had to recognise that his potting skills, learnt some years before, were at a very amateur level. He had to discover how long he would need to study and practise until he learnt to work at a sufficiently high standard and fast speed to compete in the world of the craftsman potter. Nor was it sufficient to be able to throw pots well, he had to develop his own style of craftsmanship.

The personal circumstances of each individual are unique. There is no prescriptive solution.

If the cases I have described have tended to be orientated to the male manager, this is largely because of the small number of ladies who have come on the courses. In many cases their domestic circumstances are more complex. They are often looking for work on the rebound from a divorce, or because their widows' pension and their late husbands' insurance doesn't provide enough.

The manner in which these domestic circumstances can be worked through is not dissimilar to other problems facing unemployed managers. The establishment of a detailed Database, the access to advice, coaching and counselling about issues raised, the establishment of the priorities of the urgencies and importances of what is required. These personal and family decisions can only be pointed to by the helper.

### **Making Job and Career Decisions**

It is the individual whose future is at stake. He has first to make a choice in one of three areas, always providing that he wants to have employment:

- To continue with the same work
- To branch out into something similar
- To change completely

Most people continue in work very similar to that which they have done previously. It should however be a positive decision to continue, not a drift down a pathway that has no real meaning. It may be that employment is a means to another end. One administrator came to the realisation that what he wanted out of life was a greater exposure to music, and in particular to light opera. Accordingly he took a mundane job which, he knew, from previous experience, he could do without difficulty, he could then leave work not later than 5 each evening. He was able to devote more time to singing, administering and conducting in an environment he found congenial.

It is often a sad fact that able and conscientious people stay on at a job when they have outgrown it. They feel that they should continue to support the company that pays them. They feel hurt when they are rejected when it suits the company. They may also be further hurt when applying for a new job to be repeatedly told that "You are too experienced for this post". "You are too well qualified for the vacancy we have". It requires some ruthlessness and a degree of self confidence, so often lacking in the unemployed manager, to seek a more senior and more developed job. Changes require serious preparation at the decision making stage, and the individual may require help. The big dramatic decisions, like the solicitor becoming the potter, are in a sense easier to make. The very causes of the situation are more clear cut. There is a certain inevitability about the generic nature of the decision. The detail of whether to be a potter or a weaver is in a sense immaterial. The role of helper must

be to provide a mirror, an ear, and a resource on which the individual can draw. There can be no prescriptive solution.

### **Conclusion**

The process of helping the unemployed manager is no different from that of helping any other person in a crisis. It has its own particular detail, but in the final analysis the individual must make the decision himself. The helper, whether bearing the title Lecturer, Training Officer, Social Worker, Minister or Consultant or friend, must efface himself and his own views so as to provide the maximum support for the aims and aspirations of the individual. It is important that the helper provides a view of the whole person in a total environment. Nor is helping about a sympathetic pat on the shoulders, sometimes a firmer blow about two feet lower is more appropriate.

The trainee must accept that he is in for some uncomfortable times as he searches his soul, and makes unpalatable discoveries and decisions. It is in these that he will realise the virtues of having support from a dispassionate outsider who will comment sympathetically but with a clear eye. Then he will begin to make good decisions.

The company placing an experienced and loyal person on the job market has some responsibility to him. The very least is to introduce him to, and pay for, the appropriate decision making and job hunting help.

---