1   # Career Derailment:

2   # Burnout and Bullying at the Executive Level

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Abstract

Executive derailment refers to unexpected and unwanted changes in the trajectory of an executive career caused either by factors within the person or by organisational factors external to the person, or a combination of both, leading to loss of identity. This phenomenological study explored subjective experiences of four high functioning professionals who had experienced executive derailment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results showed four superordinate themes that encapsulated a trajectory from severe loss of identity, integrity, and livelihood, to newly defined authenticity following derailment: (1) *Self-doubt and blame; (2) targeted bullying; (3) psychological vulnerability and distress; and (4) Meaning-making and personal growth.* The first three themes highlight varying levels of psychological distress and burnout and the vicarious impact on family life. The fourth theme involved a redefined self-integrity where forgiveness and psychological recovery could emerge and allow for a reconsideration of career pathways. The recognition that personal and professional growth can arise following executive derailment is a novel finding with important implications for coaches. A positive psychological and growth-oriented mindset may be helpful in harnessing change with executives following derailment.

Key words: *Derailment, burnout, bullying, psychological distress, growth.*

57 **Introduction**

58   Executive derailment, or the demise of an executive career, is involuntary demotion or

59 being made redundant below the level of anticipated achievement (Lombardo, Ruderman &

60 McCauley, 1988). Executive derailment can occur from factors internal or external to the

61 person. Internal factors can affect an individual's ability to self-reflect creating blind spots in

62 relation to leadership and sensitivity to others (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004). External factors

63 include organisational restructuring particularly in times of economic decline, or work-place

64 bullying (Gray, Gabriel, & Goregaokar, 2015; Kellerman, 2004; Lombardo, Ruderman &

65 McCauley, 1988). However, there is a paucity of research into external factors. Therefore,

66 this study explored the subjective interpretations of high functioning professionals who had

67 been derailed by external factors. It sought both positive and negative subjective

68 interpretations of experiencing organisational restructuring and/or executive level bullying.

69   High functioning executives have been shown to differ significantly from the general

70 population in attributes of empathy, self-regard, reality testing and problem solving (Stein,

71 Papadogiannis, Yip, & Sitarenios, 2009). Furthermore, they tend to exhibit emotional, social

72 and cognitive competencies across a variety of settings and cultures (Ryan, Emmerling &

73 Spencer 2009) which predict the ease at which they manage tasks and people, provide

74 training, and retain employees (Ryan, Emmerling & Spencer 2009; Stein, Papadogiannis,

75 Yip, & Sitarenios, 2009). As a consequence, derailment of high functioning individuals can

76 have costly effects on working relationships, productivity, financial outcomes, and

77 organisational functioning (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Lombardo &

78 McCauley, 1988). Additionally, the cost of derailment to the individual is also high

79 including a catastrophic loss of identity often impacting on family life, income, and

80 psychological wellbeing (McCall, 2003). Thirty to fifty per cent of high functioning

81 managers are estimated to derail at some time in their career (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1995).

82   Career executives are most commonly midlife (ages 38-50), a critical time in which

83   self-reflection and an evaluation of former dreams and current achievements often occurs

84   (Webb, 2006). However, for some executives, grandiosity, or feelings of superiority, can

85   inhibit self-reflection creating blind spots in their leadership style and sensitivity to others

86   (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004). Without awareness, derailment can occur. For others,

87   derailment can occur following organisational restructuring, poor or inaccurate feedback,

88   overly demanding timelines and workloads, or through work-place bullying (Gray et al.,

89   2015; Kellerman, 2004). At the very top of the executive chain, corporate psychopathy

90   resulting in abusive and bullying behaviours to second level managers has led to long periods

91   of stress leave, high turnover, negative organisational outcomes, and derailment (McCleskey,

92   2013).

93   Three dynamics of derailment have been identified. Two are regarded as integral

94   interpersonal flaws in the individual, for example, 1) a strength becomes a weakness (such as

95   technical expertise becoming less important than team building skills); or, 2) the individual

96   exhibits negative personality traits (such as a lack of interpersonal sensitivity) or is

97   psychologically unwell. A third less researched cause of executive derailment relates to

98   factors external to the individual including organisational changes (Lombardo, Ruderman &

99   McCauley, 1988) and within-company bullying (Gray, Gabriel, & Goregaokar, 2015).

100   However, little is known of how individuals make sense of executive derailment that is not of

101   their own making (Gentry & Shanock, 2008).

102   Workplace bullying is a behaviour used by one person to control another and involves

103   "repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers, that

104   creates a risk to health and safety" (Work Safe Australia, 2011, p. 4). Bullying can manifest

105   in direct or indirect forms. Direct forms include offensive behaviour and spreading

106   misinformation or malicious rumours. Indirect forms can include "unreasonably overloading

107 a person with work, constantly changing deadlines, deliberately excluding a person from

108 normal work activities, withholding vital information, or deliberately changing work

109 arrangements, such as rosters and leave, to inconvenience a particular worker or workers"

110 (Work Safe Australia, p.4). In 2011, the Australian Productivity Commission estimated the

111 national annual cost of productivity losses associated with workplace bullying to be between

112 $6 and $36 billion (Guilliatt, 2011). Burnout is often a consequence of bullying as the

113 targeted individual strives to respond to criticism, self-doubt and confusion.

114 Executive or managerial burnout is "a state of depletion of a person's resources and

115 energy, resulting in apathy and inexpressive behaviour towards others, having dysfunctional

116 repercussions on the individual and adverse effects on organizations" (Sharma, 2007, p. 23).

117 The effects of burnout can be physical, behavioural and psychological. Physical symptoms

118 may include emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or perceived lack of personal

119 accomplishment, while behavioural signs may include withdrawal, resentment,

120 disenchantment, discouragement, boredom or confusion (Freudenberger, 1981). Lack of

121 performance feedback, heavy workload, time pressure, conflicts surrounding roles in the

122 workplace, low social support and a lack of independence were identified as factors related to

123 burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

124 Psychologically, a burnt-out executive may have difficulties with emotional regulation,

125 and the slightest trigger may initiate feelings of anger, or a suspicious attitude involving

126 paranoia. Continued dissatisfaction with the work situation may lead to depersonalisation,

127 depression or physical ailments. Rigidity may also emerge as a serious personality

128 manifestation, where the person may become closed to any input, and thinking may become

129 inflexible (Freudenberger, 1981).

130 The wellbeing of high functioning executives and professionals is closely linked to

131 burnout and career derailment. Some individuals who feel that they have been unjustly

132   harmed by an employer may develop mental health problems (McCormack & Joseph, 2013).

133   Furthermore, profound despair has been reported by executives derailed and unemployed in

134   their 50's (Gabriel, Gray & Goregoakar, 2010), while major depression has been found in up

135   to twelve percent of former Danish managers after they discontinued work (Bech, Andersen,

136   Bech-Andersen, Tonnesen et al., 2005). Role overload and lack of social support are

137   predictors of major depression in managers (Bech et al.) and, as previously discussed, were

138   identified as factors related to burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). As yet, little is known

139   of the effects of derailment on family and relationship breakdown, long term unemployment

140   or suicide.

141   However, though stressful and traumatic events can have severe and chronic effects on

142   a person's psychological functioning, there is also evidence that positive psychological

143   growth can result from challenging and adverse events, commonly referred to as

144   posttraumatic growth (Joseph, 2011). Such growth can be viewed as the process of trying to

145   make sense of this highly challenging period, which has shattered previous goals, beliefs and

146   expectations. Growth may also involve personality development and unpacking of values to

147   accommodate new facts and experiences, in turn modifying a person's worldviews and life-

148   direction. Although this literature has developed in relation to traumatic events, it might be

149   that similar experiences of personal growth can arise from experiences of executive

150   derailment which also shatter previous goals, beliefs and expectations.

151   A few studies have explored how individuals make sense of events in the workplace

152   that have resulted in major and sometimes traumatising changes to life-direction. Executive

153   nurses, for instance, were able to turn job loss into successful career transitions (Carroll,

154   DeVincinti & Show, 1995). Webb (2006) found that with the assistance of an executive

155   coach, a derailed executive in the legal profession was able to identify his cognitive blind

156   spots and detrimental behavioural patterns through awareness of his personality structure.

157   Self-awareness has been identified as a key factor for avoiding and preventing burnout

158   and career derailment (Gentry & Shanock, 2008). It aligns well with psychological

159   flexibility, described as a fluid construct in the real world and important for psychologically

160   healthy transaction between leaders, their staff and the work environment (Kashdan &

161   Rotterburg, 2010). Executives and leaders with psychological flexibility: (1) adapt to

162   fluctuating situational demands, (2) reconfigure mental resources, (3) shift perspective, and

163   (4) balance competing desires, needs, and life domains (Kashdan & Rotterburg, 2010). High

164   achievers who are psychologically inflexible, lack awareness of their weaknesses and

165   strengths, or are unable to adapt to changes in their job environment, may be at risk of

166   potential derailment.

167   Although there is a great deal of research exploring characteristics of leadership (see

168   Hogan, Hogan & Kaiser, 2009), and some research reporting on executives who have

169   recovered from a career derailment (see Kovach, 2001), there is a paucity of rich qualitative

170   research into the 'lived' experience of career derailment distress in the context of

171   organisational change and bullying in high functioning professionals, and its impact on

172   psychological wellbeing. In addition, there is a lack of individual subjective interpretation of

173   the experience of career derailment as a product of organisational changes and workplace

174   bullying.

175   This qualitative study seeks to explore the 'lived' experience of being derailed at the

176   executive and professional level from external factors such as organisational restructuring

177   and/or executive level bullying. It is interested in both positive and negative subjective

178   interpretations of high functioning professionals particularly the impact on psychological

179   wellbeing. It is hoped that findings from this study will inform organisations, professionals,

180   therapists and coaches regarding the impact, prevention, and management of career

181   derailment and executive burnout.

182 **Method**

183 **Participants**

184   Following university ethical approval from the Committee for Ethics in Human

185 Research, the participants of the study were sourced through email correspondence with

186 organisations and 'think tanks'. It sought executives or professionals who met the selection

187 criteria, i.e. senior professionals who had experienced the phenomenon of derailment through

188 external factors. Four participants (one female and three male) aged between 47 and 64

189 participated in the study. They were all past or current senior-ranking high achievers who

190 had experienced psychological distress following interruption to a successful and high

191 functioning career through negative organisational changes and/or bullying.

192   Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality. The first participant (Diana) was in a

193 leadership position and on track to become a General Manager, however, after an

194 organisational merger, she described that she was micromanaged and bullied by an externally

195 instated General Manager. The second participant (Chris) was a retired emergency services

196 senior manager who reported that he experienced negative organisational changes which

197 resulted in a significant increase of his workload. He reported that he was subjected to

198 bullying through false accusations and experienced subsequent 'executive burnout'. The

199 third participant (Les) was a consultant physician who explained that he was targeted and

200 threatened with medical incompetence by an area health authority executive. He described

201 these threats as harassment and bullying over an extended period of time. The fourth

202 participant (Liam) was a senior manager who experienced organisational changes that

203 resulted in forced redundancy. All four participants were high achievers who reported having

204 worked successfully at senior levels for many years until the identified incidents. All

205 reported that they experienced psychological distress for which they were either unprepared

206 or lacked the resources to overcome. As a result of their distress, they all sought help from

207 psychological or medical professionals.

208 **Analytic strategy**

209   Unlike Grounded Theory or Discourse Analysis, interpretative phenomenological

210 paradigms such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) have a critical realism

211 perspective of the world focusing on how individuals socially construct and interpret their

212 world (Blaikie, 2000). As such IPA is closely aligned with the social view of symbolic

213 interactionism which accepts that: 1) people act toward things based on the meaning those

214 things have for them; 2) these meanings are derived from social interaction; and, 3) meaning

215 is modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1995). Therefore, IPA as an

216 idiographic method (Smith & Osborn, 2008) allows researchers to unfold the idiosyncratic

217 nature of each participant's narrative and meaning making of a specific phenomenon from

218 their socially constructed world allowing both diverse and converse themes to emerge.

219 Similarly, due to its iterative investigative style, IPA is recommended for investigating

220 previously unexplored topics where subjective meanings, values and beliefs are important but

221 poorly understood (Smith, 1996). At all times the researcher strives to stay within the

222 interpreted world of the participant using a 'double hermeneutic' to reflect and clarify the

223 participant making meaning of his/her experience (Smith, 1996).

224 **Procedure**

225   A semi-structured interview using a funnelling technique was developed according to

226 the protocols of IPA (see Tables 1 & 2; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This allowed the

227 phenomenon under investigation to be explored from general to specific interpretations.

228 Target questions were used to prompt responses in an attempt to understand the subjective

229 'lived' experiences of executive derailment. The questions aimed to capture both positive

230 and negative interpreted meaning of experiences. Participants were informed of the study's

231   aims and that they could withdraw at any time and request their interviews be destroyed.

232   Prior to the interviews, the participants were given a summary of the research aims.

233   Following consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the University Health

234   Clinic, via telephone or over Skype ©, as preferred by the participants as three of the

235   participants were located in another city or overseas. Each interview lasted approximately

236   one hour. Data were collected using a digital voice recorder and transcribed for analysis by

237   the first researcher and provided to the relevant participant to confirm its accuracy.

238   -insert Tables 1 and 2 about here-

239   **Data Analysis**

240   The transcriptions were individually analysed using IPA as outlined by Smith, Flowers

241   and Larkin (2009) (see Table 1). The process includes: (a) reading and re-reading with initial

242   notations; (b) development of emergent themes; (c) searching for connections across

243   emergent themes; and (d) looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al. 2009). This process

244   is a cyclical, re-iterative process, and involves constant revisiting of the transcripts seeking

245   both convergent and divergent emergent themes that are richly highlighted in the data.

246   Independent audits of the transcripts were conducted by authors 1 and 2 and evaluated by

247   author 3 to ensure validity of the themes across the data set.

248   Unlike nomothetic research studies, each participant is a unit of analysis on their own

249   terms. IPA requires the researchers to suspend their own beliefs, judgement and values when

250   interpreting the participants' understanding of their experiences. Following independent

251   auditing, robust discussion between the researchers is necessary to validate thematic

252   representation of the participants' interpretation of events.

253   **Validity and reliability**

254   This study followed the rigorous protocols of IPA to ensure trustworthiness,

255   verification, credibility, and dependability. Guba and Lincoln's (1981; 1982; 1989) earlier

256 recommendation that researchers conduct a post hoc evaluation to support trustworthiness,

257 has more recently acceded to a continual process of verification involving "checking,

258 confirming, making sure, and being certain" (p. 17, Morse, 2011). Therefore, in defining

259 rigor in qualitative research, reliability and validity is addressed through adherence to the

260 steps of the particular methodology utilised in accordance with its philosophical stance

261 (Smith, 1996). As such, design quality is driven by within-design uniformity and analytic

262 expertise (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009).

263   Importantly, in seeking subjective interpretations of a particular phenomenon,

264 qualitative research is not concerned with external reality, a primary concern of validity

265 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) but rather the internal subjective account of reality. Furthermore,

266 IPA seeks both convergent (across all transcripts) and divergent (within one transcript)

267 themes aiming to produce rich uniqueness of themes rather than saturation of themes. In

268 IPA, rigour is reliant on adherence to methodological steps (see Smith, 2011).

269   Other protocols in IPA sanction rigour including purposive sampling of a small

270 homogenous group; funnelling down to the phenomenon being explored; and the double

271 hermeneutic investigative focus of interviewing (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The

272 argument for inter-rater reliability fluctuates as important or not (Armstrong, Gosling,

273 Weissman & Marteau, 1997) whereas strict adherence to independent auditing by the

274 researchers, prior to collaborative consensus of themes substantiated by the data, remains a

275 crucial step in IPA protocols (see Smith et al., 2009).

276 **Author's perspective**

277   Interpretative analysis is intersubjective thus the investigator is positioned relative to

278 their own biases and presuppositions which need to be stated. The greatest threat to

279 credibility in qualitative research is the investigators' inability to remain open to the data,

280 sensitive and creative in their social enquiry, and adhere to the rigorous steps of the chosen

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281 method informed by philosophical underpinnings (Schwandt, 2015). All authors are

282 clinicians and researchers in the field of trauma. The second and third authors are also

283 qualified coaching professionals. The authors challenged each other's interpretation

284 throughout the investigation eliminating any theme that could not be unanimously agreed by

285 all authors.

286 <div align="center">**Results**</div>

287   Four superordinate themes emerged which are organised as four phases in a trajectory

288 towards personal growth: 1) *Self-doubt and blame;* 2) *Targeted bullying;* 3) *Psychological*

289 *vulnerability and distress;* and 4) *Meaning-making and personal growth.* Participants'

290 quotations are presented to describe and illustrate these four themes. Three of the four

291 themes describe each participant's lived experience of the negative effects of derailment,

292 including the distress of seeing their livelihood undermined, their goals eroded or

293 extinguished, as well as the psychological distress and vicarious impact on their family life.

294 The fourth theme describes subsequent meaning making and psychological growth through,

295 and following, their redefining of the 'self'.

296 **Self-doubt and Blame**

297   The first superordinate theme describes how participants perceived the initial stages of

298 derailment, changes in life circumstances and subsequent perceived changes in mood states.

299 It also describes doubting the efficacy of existing coping strategies and questioning of one's

300 capacity and self-belief.

301   For three of the participants, the derailment occurred following an organisational

302 restructure. Following a doubling of his work-load, the desire to maintain his identity and the

303 shame of failing pushed Chris towards psychological vulnerability:

304   I was pedalling really hard … it's part of my character not to fail, I have a very

305   strong sense of not wanting to fail, and so that was to the detriment of my (mental)

306   health ... I didn't have the wisdom to step back.

307   Liam perceived the changes as a threat to his identity, blaming himself for not being

308 able to adapt to the changes:

309   I was very angry of what they were doing to the whole structure that we set up …. I

310   couldn't cope with it and that's why I cracked up.

311   Diana became self-critical and began doubting her abilities:

312   I missed out on the promotion and thought obviously I wasn't doing something

313   right … in the first couple of years I was almost paranoid.

314   Les also had thoughts of self-doubt and victimisation:

315   During this experience I had my doubts that maybe I wasn't quite as good a doctor as I

316   thought. I had a sense of injustice that I had done nothing wrong and yet I've been black

317   banded from the hospital which is part of my profession; which is part of my livelihood.

318 **Targeted Bullying**

319   This theme describes internal reactions to perceived external threats to wellbeing and

320 schema. It describes the debilitating feeling of being bullied or, as reported by Chris, being

321 falsely accused of bullying. Feeling targeted emerged through over management to the point

322 of micro-management, having doubts placed over one's reputation, and being unjustly

323 summoned to explain behaviours.

324   Diana felt targeted unjustly by the level of micro-management that undermined her

325 sense of competence:

326   He was using isolating behaviours; one minute I'd be told that I shouldn't be

327   talking to a colleague…the next minute I'd be told that it was all ok…I would get

328   my work constantly scrutinised, and he basically micro managed people until they

329   couldn't do anything.

330   Les described his initial inability to recognise that he was being targeted with bullying

331 by his senior executive manager:

332   It took me a while to realise that she [the senior executive] had effectively put a

333   black ban on me, she would veto them [my job applications] without anything in

334   writing.

335   Chris experienced the shameful loss of reputation associated with derailment:

336   It was a difficult five months because everyone knew about the accusation, my

337   reputation was tainted.

338   Les described how it impacted on his professional identity and livelihood:

339   There was a cloud over me. Many of the local GPs in the area they thought that I

340   was under suspicion. It was impacting on my professional work and my livelihood.

341   **Psychological Vulnerability and Distress**

342   *Psychological vulnerability and distress* also consistently emerged as a theme across

343 participants, and captured the cumulative effect of derailment.

344   I was overloaded with work, and then the false bullying and harassment claim were

345   made against me … I didn't spring back, I didn't come back from those claims, and

346   I eventually fell over … and I had strong suicidal tendencies. (Chris)

347   Feeling unwanted at the workplace increased vulnerability to high risk thoughts and

348 behaviour:

349   I suddenly slipped down hill in a big way … I used to fly off the handle pretty

350   easily, once, a couple of times I got into the car and took off, and disappeared for

351   an hour, and there were a couple of times I felt like driving the car into a tree, in

352   that 12 month period. (Liam)

353   Accustomed to accepting responsibility, the lack of validation and the insidiousness

354 of bullying contributed to mental health difficulties:

355   I felt like a *failure* … and I just went into I suppose a depressive spiral, over a

356   period of about six months … but I didn't recognise that I was depressed at the

357   time. (Diana)

358   The powerlessness of their situations, and feelings of being unsupported in the

359   workplace, led to behaviour that isolated the participants from their loved ones, and

360   vicariously contaminated other areas of their lives. Participants were not able to cope with

361   the changes and felt that others also did not understand what they were experiencing. Both

362   Chris and Les described breakdowns in family relationships:

363   We were under pressure, the kids were stressed and didn't know what was going

364   on … and it was one of the reasons my marriage had come to an end. (Les)

365   Struggling to manage the spiralling downwards sense-of-self in the aftermath of extreme

366   invalidation, relationships suffered irreparable damage:

367   My anxiety and my poor reactions to some family members and their inability to

368   understand my mental health, has caused a breakdown to those relationships.

369   (Chris)

370   The decision not to complain about the bullying or the false accusations of bullying

371   contributed to regret and a lack of closure from two participants:

372   In hindsight and reflection, I should have gone outside the organisation, gone to an

373   independent person or other Government agency and taken action against these

374   individuals. (Chris)

375   For some, the inability to challenge acts of injustice, resonate as unfinished business:

376   I haven't entirely let it go, it's still quite an intrinsic part of my life but it just

377   doesn't make it feel as depressed and as unhappy as it used to. (Diana)

378   Chris regretted not accepting his own limits, allowing things to "fall over":

379   I should have stood my ground and basically said "no" ... I should have allowed

380   some things to fall over, and that would have proven that it didn't work. But I

381   proved that it did work for a couple of years because I did it, but it was at the

382   expense of my health.

383   **Meaning-making and Personal Growth**

384   Participants reported that re-appraisals of new meanings were achieved after

385   experiencing self-awareness and moments of self-realisation, and mobilisation of internal

386   agency:

387   12 months later, I read an article … on psychopathic bullies … it made me feel a

388   lot better, I actually finally felt that I had something I could hold on to, to describe

389   what had happened (Diana)

390   Moments of self-realisation clarified that the fears of ongoing bullying were irrational,

391   providing increased awareness and relief from the emotional pain of self-doubt and self-

392   blame:

393   I was fearful of meeting my old boss, literally fearful, the old sweaty hands thing,

394   and I realised at that point that a lot of what I was feeling wasn't rational, and the

395   churn I was having over this, and that was I suppose was a point of clarity to me.

396   (Diana)

397   Les slowly began to regain his sense of direction and sought redress by taking action against

398   what he felt was an attack on his integrity and livelihood. He began to re-honour himself and

399   trust his judgement again:

400   It took me a year to wake up that this wasn't gonna go away ... It took me a while

401   to wake up to the fact that unless I got to an external body to pass judgement on the

402   whole issue, nothing was ever gonna change.

403   The distress of the burnout was reappraised as an opportunity for increased self-knowledge

404   and better judgement:

405   The really important lesson that I've learned that in my life I've pushed myself too

406   hard on too many fronts. (Chris)

407   Positive and genuine professional and social support resulted in feeling understood and cared

408   for:

409   The thing that I'll always remember is my doctor saying, "I understand what you're

410   going through, I know what the problem is and I understand it all." (Liam)

411 In addition to describing the support she received from her partner, Diana in particular

412 described the value of having a personal coach in providing her with practical solutions:

413   I think the personal coach has probably been the biggest impact. I mean time to

414   some degree would almost certainly have moved me on and got me to a better

415   place, but I think the personal coach helped the most.

416 One participant considered the stressful events were an opportunity for learning:

417   In everyone's life a little rain must fall … about time I got a kick in the pants. (Les)

418 In particular, Diana redefined herself:

419   I got a lot fitter and socialising with friends a lot more, I'd gone back to university

420   … I said ok I need to get fit, I need to look after myself a bit, was trying many of

421   those [self-development] things, and reconnect with my friends … I became a bit

422   better saying well, I'm not coping with this at the moment, maybe take some

423   workload off me.

424 One participant found a level of peace by defusing the anger, shame and pain and replacing

425 them with forgiveness:

426   The importance of being able to forgive and move on is a very important lesson I

427   have learned and still learning. (Chris)

428 Having experienced the distress of derailment, participants expressed their desire to help

429 others who are going through similar life changing experiences:

430   I hope that sometime in the future I may have the ability to speak into the lives of

431   others who have had a similar experience … I can see and hope that it would be of

432   assistance to others. (Chris)

433 Increased empathy was also reported by participants:

434   I find that I'm more aware of people; I can see the signs in people who are having

435   trouble … I think I'm far more tolerant of people who are finding it tough at work

436   than I probably was if I hadn't gone through it. (Liam)

437   Significant changes in life purpose were reported. It appeared that by re-appraising her

438 priorities, Diana's psychological flexibility allowed her to change her identity from a senior

439 manager to a consultant. By making this difficult decision, a very positive change occurred

440 as she described increased contentment:

441   This experience has been a key to personal growth, and it probably pushed the

442   personal growth in a quite a different line to what might have happened if I had not

443   been in that situation, if I had not have been in that situation. (Diana)

444 Changes in thinking styles also resulted in significant increases in productivity:

445   I suppose I stopped fighting with myself on a lot of things. I actually got a lot

446   happier and more content … I stopped being so task focused, and started sleeping

447   again which was good … and I was probably not as productive as I am now as

448   well. (Diana)

449 New meanings involved regaining the feelings of spirituality and connectedness, and re-

450 gaining a sense of identity:

451   In my early twenties I had a quite a strong sense of self, and I felt I'd actually lost it

452   in the corporate climb and, I think that this [the derailment experience] gave me an

453   opportunity to regain some of that. (Diana)

454 One participant regained his subjective self-worth by rechannelling his energy from fighting

455 change to adapting to the change, and re-gaining recognition for his work in an alternate

456 field:

457   I get a lot of satisfaction from what I'm doing now, I'm contributing back to the

458   industry … I think the experience that I gained since I've left has made me a better

459   person. (Liam)

460 For another, the decision to make a formal complaint and stand up against perceived injustice

461 was related to better outcomes and more closure. Perceptions of increased resilience, self-

462 worth, and authenticity surfaced:

463   I'm far more prepared if there was ever such a second event, that I would be far

464   more assertive and aggressive and much much quicker at not letting the issue drag

465   on … I'm pleased I stuck it out. I would always have had the doubt that maybe she

466   was right, maybe I wasn't performing up to scratch … I really would have always

467   had a cloud over me that in some way I just wasn't performing appropriately.

468   (Les)

469 **Discussion**

470   This study provides an insider's lens on career derailment in high level

471 executives/professionals. Such understanding is important for coaching psychologists,

472 particularly how these experiences provide opportunities for new meaning making, and

473 personal and professional growth. Specifically, the implications for coaching psychologists

474 include the importance of being aware of the early warning signs of burnout in high

475 functioning individuals, the importance of acting on these signs with psychological flexibility

476 as early as possible, but in a way that helps the executive to find new and more purposeful

477 direction. The notion that career derailment may provide a springboard for positive change is

478 a novel result and one that has significant implications for executive coaching.

479   Traditionally, the experiences that arise from career derailment such as burnout have

480 been discussed in relation to which remedial clinical interventions might best be able to help

481 the individual. Coaching psychologists are well placed to recognise and refer onwards when

482 other services are needed. However, our research suggests that there is a larger coaching role

483 in which the client can be helped to draw on their agency towards positive psychological

484 outcomes. As such, coaching that facilitates self-questioning, openness to change, and

485 maintains a growth-mindset may best help the executive overcome adversity and move

486   forward more purposefully. As highlighted by Webb (2006), coaches can tap into the

487   different stages of the lifespan and promote change as part of a life adventure that can inform

488   executive wisdom. Specifically, applications from positive psychology and the field of

489   posttraumatic growth which help clients to harvest hope, identify change, and re-author their

490   lives seem relevant (Joseph, 2011).

491   The current research offers an in-depth and rigorous qualitative investigation of four

492   participants but further research is needed. First, there is a need for research into what makes

493   for effective coaching following career derailment, but also to understand more fully what

494   defines successful coaching. The benefits that arose for these participants following

495   derailment appear to be as much related to changes in personal direction and new priorities in

496   life as they are to do with the enhancement of their career. Future research with executives

497   who report personal and professional growth subsequent to derailment might specifically

498   probe for what it is that they found helpful in making this transition from a state of distress

499   and vulnerability and to explore the relevance of the concept of posttraumatic growth.

500   Second, qualitative studies do not offer generalisability. However, there is no reason to

501   expect that our findings will not apply to other groups of professionals where derailment has

502   occurred due to extrinsic factors i.e., bullying or organisational restructuring. What is less

503   certain is whether growth is as likely when derailment occurs as a result of intrinsic

504   personality attributes of the individual. Future research could specifically examine the

505   experiences of individuals following executive derailment caused by intrinsic factors.

506   Third, it is important for organisations to understand that the cost of executive

507   derailment is high. For that reason, organisations need to be aware of the risks to their

508   executive staff of derailment when carrying out organisational restructuring. When

509   derailment is due to re-organisational strategies, organisations could promote flexible and

510   creative opportunities to redefine identities and grow psychologically and keep on track those

511   who might otherwise derail, contributing to retention of valuable individuals. Similarly,

512   bullying at the executive level requires specific procedural and psychological support. When

513   bullying is responsible for derailment an organisation can lose a high functioning individual

514   who is the victim of bullying but retain the perpetrator, who may continue to disrupt

515   productivity. Early identification of disruptive and bullying behaviours is essential. In both

516   these situations, coaching psychologists are able to bring independent and fresh perspectives.

517   Finally, organisations need to recognise that derailment experiences are common and

518   work towards reducing the stigma that may be attached to it, and to understand that when

519   derailment occurs it can actually provide opportunities for the personal and professional

520   growth of the executive which in turn can be to the benefit of the organisation.

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625   **Notations:**

626   […] Indicates editorial elision where non-relevant material has been omitted

627   [-]   Indicates pauses in speech by participant

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635 **Table 1**
636 *Steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Process*

Process

Step 1:	Step by step independent auditing by first and second authors which involved emersion in each interview data through repeated listening and reading of the recordings and transcribed verbatim transcript. Independent initial impressions and observations are recorded.
Step 2:	Creation of a comprehensive set of initial notes primarily noting significant content, language and concepts that appear embedded in the transcript. This is done independently at this stage with no collaboration.
Step 3:	Thematic emergence occurs for both auditors that concisely captures the essence of the transcript and guides further analysis.
Step 4:	Establishing connections between emergent themes and identified clusters of themes in each individual case. Independent auditing.
Step 5:	These four steps were repeated for each transcript independently by the first and second authors before a final coming together for robust discussion and consideration of overall data sets that was substantiated by rich verbatim extracts for each theme. No theme was included in the final set that had not been agreed upon as being substantiated within the data. The third author acted as an independent evaluator of the final results. This included examination of sets of themes for convergent and divergent themes across all transcripts. Five subordinate themes emerged.
	Discussion between authors ensured identified themes were supported by the data set Superordinate theme identified. Linking of relevant theory to identified themes.

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639 **Table 2**
640 Semi structured Interview questions prompts
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643 How your derailment experience has impacted on your life so far?
644 How you have made sense of your derailment experience and its impact on your life?
645 How you feel you as a person have changed because of this experience?
646 What about this experience in particular has impacted on you either positively or negatively?
647 How you make sense of the human dynamics that you have been caught up in?
648 Any psychological, philosophical, existential thoughts that have altered or become part of
649 your thinking since this experience?
650 How your future will be influenced from this experience?
651 How has it influenced your feelings, thoughts, relationships, goals since this event?
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