

Restarting a Stalled Career

By

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Even star performers sometimes stall.

Where they once won regular promotions, they're suddenly passed over—leaving them feeling stale and stuck. Their old ways no longer work. Yet they don't understand why.

If this sounds like you, it's time to take action and revive your trajectory. Plateaus are inevitable during the decades of a work life. But as businesses raise expectations for managers' performance, even a little coasting can kill a career, leadership experts say.

Plateaued executives commonly struggle to adapt to change, according to the nonprofit Center for Creative Leadership, which has amassed three decades of research on why some people's careers derail.

“Executives hope their stalled progress will heal itself, but they often end up retired in place,” warns Craig Chappelow, a senior faculty member.

David Wager, president and owner of Foster & Wager Inc., a small vendor of computer hardware and software, says his company let go two plateaued executives in 2013. They resisted his approach for reaching sales goals, he recalls.

“You have to continue to grow in your career,” Mr. Wager explains. “Otherwise, you’re going backward.”

Executive coaches typically encourage stalled stars to undergo rigorous self-assessments, including aptitude tests.

A focus on the future can help. Coach Connie Kadansky urges plateaued clients to set specific new goals by sitting down and writing the next chapter of their life story.

Next, choose the catalyst “that will get you to where you want to get to,” says Rory Clark, another sales executive coach. The introverted counsellor reports he recently cured his own

career malaise – “I didn’t want to climb one more mountain”—after he fell in love with an energetic extrovert. She gave him “a reason for living and achieving,” he remembers. They married in October.

Advised by Mr. Clark, Brian Q. Davis quit as general manager of North America for a British e-commerce startup last spring because he suspected he had reached a plateau and would not rise further at the company.

The executive became a vice president of Scorpion Healthcare LLC, a unit of an Internet marketing concern. Mr. Davis says he no longer worries about stalled career progress because his new coworkers encourage him to keep raising his game. “If you are playing on a court with Michael Jordan, you’re going to play up,” he notes.

Job hopping may mean a demotion, however. A sales manager for an information-technology storage business concluded he wouldn’t advance after the top brass launched a year-long attempt to sell the company. In early 2014, he accepted a salesman’s position and sizable pay cut by joining one of his employer’s distributors.

It was a step down, but he already has been promoted twice. He’s currently regional vice president of sales.

To make such a move work, “you have to broaden your vision, take risks and be prepared to work really hard to establish your credibility with the new employer,” observes Tony

Beshara, an author of career books and president of placement firm Babich & Associates.
(Mr. Beshara knew the executive from prior searches.)

By 2010, Marc B. Lautenbach had run the North American sales organization at [International Business Machines](#) for five years. “I was ready to make a step forward,” he recollects.

Rather than elevate him to a global role, IBM wanted him to lead its North American consulting unit. The new assignment seemed like “a step sideways,” Mr. Lautenbach says.

He ultimately accepted the consulting job, hoping to round out his experience. Two years ago, Mr. Lautenbach left IBM to take command of the mail and document-services company [Pitney Bowes](#). The chief executive now realizes that his lateral IBM move “was only the beginning of a new chapter.”

Other tactics, such as acquiring new skills or credentials, may put a plateaued career back on the fast track. A senior program manager at a major defense contractor says she started a part-time masters’ degree in project management two years ago when she felt she wasn’t moving forward.

While attending night classes, she remained plateaued. “I was very frustrated as to how my career was progressing,” adds the woman, who wished to remain anonymous because she is not sure her future career plan includes her current employer.

The woman obtained a project management certificate this summer, and in December, the company made her a solutions manager – one rung below its executive ranks. When she finishes her degree in 2016, “I am definitely going to raise my hand for something higher,” she vows.

Efforts to polish your portfolio won’t pay off unless colleagues start viewing you differently, too. To demonstrate an interest in fresh approaches, try opening meetings with, “Why don’t we...,” proposes Laurence J. Stybel, president of Stybel Peabody, a Boston leadership consultancy.

A reinvention effort restored career momentum for one veteran top performer at Foster Wager, according to Mr. Wager. The executive’s sales had slid in 2012. Reaching out to business contacts, the executive learned some thought he wasn’t very interested in his job.

Mr. Wager says he persuaded the former star to make customers’ needs a higher priority. The man achieved record sales and pay during 2013.

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