

CAREER UPS, DOWNS

There's a story about a frog and a kettle of water. The gist of it is: If you bring the water to a boil and toss the frog in, it will attempt to hop out immediately. If you put the frog in a kettle of cold water and slowly bring it to a boil, the frog won't hop out and will die.

What does this story have to do with careers and business? Plenty, because too many workers are "the frog."

Like the frog placed initially in the cold water, they don't realize when the comfort zone turns to the danger zone. Their careers die and they wonder why.

Here are some examples:

Awareness -- Lots of people do their jobs without understanding what's going on within the company. Like the frog, they ignore the danger signs of hot water. Signs like: budget cuts, hiring freezes, elimination of training, earnings reports, contract awards/losses, change in communication patterns of senior management or your boss, your lack of high-visibility projects, etc.

When bad things happen to frogs, they are unaware and unprepared, and end up playing one of three hot-water games: "Victim", "Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda" or "Blame Game."

Frogs know they can't win any of these games, yet they persist in playing. At the first sign the company's in hot water, start developing your action plan. At the second sign, implement it. If you don't, the water will continue getting hotter and the captains will take you down with their ship.

Inertia --- You've been in the same job for some time and with the company for years. You haven't done much, if anything, to improve your skill set. You figure that your job is secure because of your seniority.

Wrong. You're in the danger zone. Not only is job security a myth, so is seniority. When deciding who goes in a downsizing, companies look at the skills of its employees, not their tenure.

Inertia also keeps the frog from jumping out (i.e. looking for another job). You must create your own opportunities. If you've been in a position for more than two years, you're borderline danger zone. This is particularly true for workers under-30 because their initial workplace experiences lay the foundation of their long-term career path.

You should also look at job postings in the newspaper and online on a regular basis. Why? They provide clues about the marketability of those with similar skills and information on employer expectations relative to skills desired.

Resume-building experiences -- Regardless of how long you've been in a job, your resume must be up-to-date. Why? Updating your resume every quarter forces you to evaluate the "water temperature" -- if there's little change in what it says after a few quarters, the water is heating up.

Take a look at what you've done during the past 90 days and what's on your plate for the next 90. What have you learned? What do you expect to learn? You're in the danger zone if the learning isn't resulting in accomplishments to list in your resume.

Positioning - This deals with staying out of hot water to begin with. It involves two areas: professional relationships and your ability to say "No." Professional relationships open doors to both learning and jobs. Don't expect others to toot your horn for you, so learn how to toot it without blowing it. The method is called stealth bragging; you talk about what you've accomplished without using "I." Stealth brags start with things like: "The team relied on me to -"; "The two of us solved -"; "Our customer is pleased with -."

On the "Just say no" front, you have to exercise control over your work situation or other frogs will drag you into their kettle. Be tactful; be firm.

