

How to Mount an Executive Comeback: Try a Mix of Spin and Candor

Forced out executives need to restore their credibility by changing how others view their departure, leadership specialists say.

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ILLUSTRATION: David Cutler

Getting bounced from a high-powered job can be painful—and permanent. But in today’s tight labor market, some top managers are finding ways to rebound.

Executives who make successful comebacks often restore their professional credibility by taking charge of their story and changing how others view their forced departure, leadership specialists and executive recruiters say.

Last month saw two major executive comebacks. Jim Donald, ousted from [Starbucks Corp.](#) a decade ago, [became president and chief operating officer of Albertsons Cos.](#), a grocery chain in 35 states and Washington, D.C. When Starbucks asked him to step down from his chief executive perch in 2008, the coffee company's share price was depressed amid worries that the chain had over-expanded.

Albertsons's announcement March 5 that Mr. Donald was taking its second-highest job said he led Starbucks through a time of "strong growth." Mr. Donald declined to comment.

In late March, Deborah Wahl joined General Motors Co. [as chief marketing officer for its Cadillac brand.](#) She left a similar role at [McDonald's Corp.](#) last year as part of a management shake-up aimed at reviving the burger chain's fortunes.

Ms. Wahl told Cadillac that she helped transform McDonald's during her three-year stint and her exit was a mutual decision, a person familiar with her situation recalled.

An assessment of 155 executives by G.H. Smart & Co., a leadership advisory firm, found that nearly 25% of the executives had been dismissed at least once. And of those, 70% found a fresh job within nine months—usually at the same level or higher.

People who rebound tend to own their mistakes rather than blaming others and they learn from them, says Elena Lytkina Botelho, a G.H. Smart partner and co-author of "The CEO Next Door." "Executives who saw their mistakes as failures were less successful in their next job," Ms. Botelho added.

Pervasive social media can keep messy exits in the spotlight and delay leaders from moving on.

"The permanence of our mistakes when recorded online can take us down instantly—or certainly make it a lot harder to overcome a loss of credibility," says Joelle K. Jay, an executive coach and co-author of "The New Advantage," a book for women leaders.

Gail Kelman, a senior manager counseled by Dr. Jay, said she struggled to explain to potential employers why [MetLife Inc.](#) eliminated her position in late 2012. She had worked there 15 years and advanced to handling leadership development for its U.S. staffers.

Getting laid off for the first time felt "very much like a failure," Ms. Kelman says. "So much of my worth was tied up in my role."

Dr. Jay encouraged her to craft and practice a brief description linking her layoff to MetLife's revamped strategic direction and insurance-industry shifts. Repeated rehearsals allowed Ms. Kelman to move past anger and tears in order to pitch herself effectively.

In early 2013, she joined Guardian Life Insurance Co. of America as a midlevel manager and two years later, won an executive role for the first time. Ms. Kelman now heads learning and career development for the insurer.

Other executives regain credibility by confidently discussing how their setback has made them better bosses. "It's how you recover from a job loss that really builds your character," said William Amelio, chief executive of [Avnet Inc.](#), an electronics distributor.

Mr. Amelio was an Avnet board member when fellow directors considered making him interim CEO in 2016. Mr. Amelio shared with them the lessons he learned after he was terminated without cause the previous year as chief of [CHC Group Ltd.](#) , an oil-field services firm.

Mr. Amelio joined CHC in 2010, about 18 months after being ousted as leader of Chinese computer maker [Lenovo Group Ltd.](#) , which had been dealing with a sharp downturn. While at Lenovo, he cut costs by \$1 billion, fixed the company's supply chain and adopted a strategy that helped it operate for a long time, he said.

"I was too eager to get back into the CEO seat," Mr. Amelio recalled telling the rest of Avnet's board. In hindsight, he said, "I should have been more selective on my next job."

In taking the CHC CEO job, Mr. Amelio overlooked the insurmountable challenge of commanding a capital-intensive business burdened by high debt and falling demand during an energy industry downturn.

Mr. Amelio ran CHC for five years until a new investor decided to bring in a fresh management team. CHC filed for bankruptcy protection in 2016, the year after Mr. Amelio left.

Avnet directors gave him their vote of confidence as interim CEO that July and then made him its permanent leader two months later.