

A large white letter 'C' is positioned on the left side of the image. The background is a grey wall with a shadow of a ladder cast on it. Two black pencils are standing upright on a wooden floor in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# POWERFUL TIPS FOR OVERCOMING CAREER SETBACKS

BILL TREASURER

# Quick, what do Hillary Clinton, Steve Jobs, Abraham Lincoln, and even President Donald Trump have in common? During their careers, all suffered through spectacular failures.

At some point, every leader is confronted with the reality that his or her leadership is seriously and substantially flawed. It is at this precise moment when a leader is faced with a choice: learn and grow or remain blindly loyal to ignorance. Every leader worth his or her salt will get a psychological kick in the ass eventually. It is a critical and inevitable part of the leadership experience. The untold truth about leadership is that leaders don't progress from *good* to *great*: they go from *decidedly bad* to *pretty good*. For the last two decades, I've worked with thousands of leaders across the globe. What follows is what they've taught me about how to overcome career setbacks and become a stronger leader in the process.

**Sulk.** Look, you're going to sulk, so I won't patronize you by telling you not to. That said, make your sulking productive. Carve out time to be alone. Go sit by a lake, go for a long drive, or tap into your inner Forrest Gump and go for a long, long run. Whatever you do, though, don't sulk around other people. Being around a sulker ain't fun!

**Stay present and feel your feelings.** Rather than try to avoid all that surfaces for you during and immediately after the humiliating event, fully immerse yourself in the experience. What feelings come up for you? Do you feel embarrassed, fearful, resentful, or something else? Ask yourself, "What information is this feeling trying to give me?" and "What is the lesson this feeling is trying to teach me?" What fears are at work? How might your feelings and fears serve you once the entire experience plays out?

**Get perspective.** Yes, you're embarrassed, and you feel that you've just convinced your bosses that you don't have what it takes to be one of them. In fact, nearly all of them likely experienced a big career failure. Find one who has, tell her what you're going through, and tap into her wisdom.

**Earn your hard knocks degree.** Think of your failure as a degree from an elite university where you got “schooled.” Your failure is a grueling type of education. You wouldn’t want to go through it again, but the lessons you learned are invaluable and will have a positive and enduring impact on your career. It’s a good idea for you to document all the lessons you learned so you can quickly refer to them when facing similar challenges in the future. That way you won’t have to repeat any classes!

**Focus on the long game.** A kick is just a momentary speed bump on your longer leadership career. The spike in pain will eventually yield to worthwhile lessons and changes. Focus on where you ultimately want your career to end up, not the detour it may have taken.

**Answer the holy question.** Here are the four most important words in the English language: What do you want? Think of your answer in lifelong terms. What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of ideals do you want to stand for? What kind of mark do you want to leave on the world? When you see your career setbacks as events that can actually move you closer your desires, they become less threatening.

**Broaden your view of courage.** Being vulnerable, open, and receptive to change is a form of courage. Hard-charging types wrongly see courage as being fearless. Nothing could be further from the truth. Courage is fearful. The simplest definition of courage is “acting despite being afraid.” Courage requires fear. As long as you keep moving forward, it’s when there’s a knot in your stomach, a lump in your throat, and sweat on your palms that your courage is doing its job. Comfort may be comfortable, but it’s also stagnant. You don’t grow in a zone of comfort. You grow, progress, and evolve in a zone of discomfort. The more uncomfortable the kick feels, the more growth can result. Have the courage to be uncomfortable.

*“The untold truth about leadership is that leaders don’t progress from good to great: they go from decidedly bad to pretty good.”*

**Don't be oblivious to yourself.** Self-exploration and discovery can be painful, but what is more painful in the long run is being a stunted human being, incapable of acknowledging, assimilating, or shoring up your shortcomings. Close your blind spots by inviting feedback from others about their perception of your leadership, work ethic, attitude, and commitment to getting things done. Remember the words of legendary psychologist Carl Jung, "There is no coming into consciousness without pain."

**Be your own project.** Lots of people lead projects better than they lead themselves. Think about what it takes to lead a great project. You start by identifying your desired outcomes, you put together a timeline and pinpoint critical milestones, you marshal the resources the project will need to be successful, and you identify metrics to track progress. Guess what? You can manage your career recovery the exact same way.

**Control what you can.** Much about a career butt kick is beyond our control. We don't get to choose, for example, the timing of the kick, who kicks us, and how hard the kick is. But how we respond to the butt kick is entirely within our control. For example, after getting fired you could take control of writing your resume, lining up job interviews, working with an executive coach to process your career setback, and more. Acceptance is easier when you have some semblance, however small, of control.

**Conduct a kick review.** List all the butt kicks you've gotten over your career. What was the situation? Who kicked you? How did you contribute to the kick? What themes emerge from all the kicks you've gotten? What lessons did you draw from the kicks, and how have they impacted your leadership?

**Reduce judgment, increase honesty.** When your career setback comes, don't waste time obsessing about all the ways you've let yourself down. Instead, get out a piece of paper and list all the ways you may have contributed to the kick. Be rigorously honest. Identify the lessons you'll carry forward to prevent similar career kicks in the future.

*“ Nearly all of life's greatest lessons come down to these two words: let go. Only by releasing your tight grip on how you wanted things to be can you fully accept things as they are.*

**Surrender.** Nearly all of life's greatest lessons come down to these two words: let go. Only by releasing your tight grip on how you wanted things to be can you fully accept things as they are. Let go of the condition that existed before the kick, so you can grab hold of the better leader you can be after the butt kick lessons take root.

**Be good to yourself.** If you want to be a good leader, be good to yourself. Remember these two words: personal fidelity. Be faithful to taking care of yourself. Make time for fun, play, and just being. Get coaching if you need to lose weight, stop smoking, or get in shape. Treating yourself well is the first sign of self-respect. And, hey, if you don't respect yourself, why should you expect others to respect you?

How leaders deal with, or fail to deal with, career ass-kicks will make all the difference toward their future effectiveness, impact, and well-being as leaders. **A good old-fashioned kick to the keister can be the turning point in one's career—the moment at which a leader assesses her strengths, clarifies her values, and develops a leadership voice and style that are authentic and true. Applying the tips above will help you convert your embarrassing failure into future success.** 📌

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Bill Treasurer is chief encouragement officer of Giant Leap Consulting, a courage-building company. For over two decades, Treasurer has worked with thousands of leaders across the globe, strengthening their leadership influence. His newest book, *A Leadership Kick in the Ass*, provides practical tips for building confidence and humility. His other bestselling books include *Leaders Open Doors*, *Courage Goes to Work*, and *Right Risk*. His clients include NASA, Saks Fifth Avenue, UBS Bank, Walsh Construction, Lenovo, Hugo Boss, Children's Miracle Network, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. You can learn more at [www.BillTreasurer.com](http://www.BillTreasurer.com) and [www.CourageBuilding.com](http://www.CourageBuilding.com).

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