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1 Career Derailment:

2 Burnout and Bullying at the Executive Level

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29 **Career derailment:**

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33  
34 **Abstract**

35  
36 Executive derailment refers to unexpected and unwanted changes in the trajectory of an  
37 executive career caused either by factors within the person or by organisational factors  
38 external to the person, or a combination of both, leading to loss of identity. This  
39 phenomenological study explored subjective experiences of four high functioning  
40 professionals who had experienced executive derailment. Semi-structured interviews were  
41 conducted and data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).  
42 Results showed four superordinate themes that encapsulated a trajectory from severe loss of  
43 identity, integrity, and livelihood, to newly defined authenticity following derailment: (1)  
44 *Self-doubt and blame; (2) targeted bullying; (3) psychological vulnerability and distress; and*  
45 *(4) Meaning-making and personal growth.* The first three themes highlight varying levels of  
46 psychological distress and burnout and the vicarious impact on family life. The fourth theme  
47 involved a redefined self-integrity where forgiveness and psychological recovery could  
48 emerge and allow for a reconsideration of career pathways. The recognition that personal  
49 and professional growth can arise following executive derailment is a novel finding with  
50 important implications for coaches. A positive psychological and growth-oriented mindset  
51 may be helpful in harnessing change with executives following derailment.

52  
53 **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, psychological symptoms may include depersonalisation  
119 or perceived lack of personal accomplishment, while behavioural signs may include  
120 withdrawal, resentment, disenchantment, discouragement, boredom or confusion  
121 (Freudenberger, 1981). Lack of performance feedback, heavy workload, time pressure,  
122 conflicts surrounding roles in the workplace, low social support and a lack of independence  
123 were identified as factors related to 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.



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## Method

### Participants

Following university ethical approval from the Committee for Ethics in Human Research, the participants of the study were sourced through email correspondence with organisations and ‘think tanks’. It sought executives or professionals who met the selection criteria, i.e. senior professionals who had experienced the phenomenon of derailment through external factors. Four participants (one female and three male) aged between 47 and 64 participated in the study. They were all past or current senior-ranking high achievers who had experienced psychological distress following interruption to a successful and high functioning career through negative organisational changes and/or bullying.

Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality. The first participant (Diana) was in a leadership position and on track to become a General Manager, however, after an organisational merger, she described that she was micromanaged and bullied by an externally instated General Manager. The second participant (Chris) was a retired emergency services senior manager who reported that he experienced negative organisational changes which resulted in a significant increase of his workload. He reported that he was subjected to bullying through false accusations and experienced subsequent ‘executive burnout’. The third participant (Les) was a consultant physician who explained that he was targeted and threatened with medical incompetence by an area health authority executive. He described these threats as harassment and bullying over an extended period of time. The fourth participant (Liam) was a senior manager who experienced organisational changes that resulted in forced redundancy. All four participants were high achievers who reported having worked successfully at senior levels for many years until the identified incidents. All 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

281 method informed by philosophical underpinnings (Schwandt, 2015). All authors are  
282 clinicians and researchers in the field of trauma. The third author is also a qualified coaching  
283 professional. The authors challenged each other's interpretation throughout the investigation  
284 eliminating any theme that could not be unanimously agreed by all authors.

## 285 **Results**

286 Four superordinate themes emerged which are organised as four phases in a trajectory  
287 towards personal growth: 1) *Self-doubt and blame*; 2) *Targeted bullying*; 3) *Psychological*  
288 *vulnerability and distress*; and 4) *Meaning-making and personal growth*. Participants'  
289 quotations are presented to describe and illustrate these four themes. Three of the four  
290 themes describe each participant's lived experience of the negative effects of derailment,  
291 including the distress of seeing their livelihood undermined, their goals eroded or  
292 extinguished, as well as the psychological distress and vicarious impact on their family life.  
293 The fourth theme describes subsequent meaning making and psychological growth through,  
294 and following, their redefining of the 'self'.

### 295 **Self-doubt and Blame**

296 The first superordinate theme describes how participants perceived the initial stages of  
297 derailment, changes in life circumstances and subsequent perceived changes in mood states.  
298 It also describes doubting the efficacy of existing coping strategies and questioning of one's  
299 capacity and self-belief.

300 For three of the participants, the derailment occurred following an organisational  
301 restructure. Following a doubling of his work-load, the desire to maintain his identity and the  
302 shame of failing pushed Chris towards psychological vulnerability:

303 I was pedalling really hard ... it's part of my character not to fail, I have a very  
304 strong sense of not wanting to fail, and so that was to the detriment of my (mental)  
305 health ... I didn't have the wisdom to step back.

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

308           I was very angry of what they were doing to the whole structure that we set up .... I  
309 couldn't cope with it and that's why I cracked up.

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

311           I missed out on the promotion and thought obviously I wasn't doing something  
312 right ... in the first couple of years I was almost paranoid.

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

314           During this experience I had my doubts that maybe I wasn't quite as good a doctor as I  
315 thought. I had a sense of injustice that I had done nothing wrong and yet I've been black  
316 banded from the hospital which is part of my profession; which is part of my livelihood.

### 317 **Targeted Bullying**

318           This theme describes internal reactions to perceived external threats to wellbeing and  
319 schema. It describes the debilitating feeling of being bullied or, as reported by Chris, being  
320 falsely accused of bullying. Feeling targeted emerged through over management to the point  
321 of micro-management, having doubts placed over one's reputation, and being unjustly  
322 summoned to explain behaviours.

323           Diana felt targeted unjustly by the level of micro-management that undermined her  
324 sense of competence:

325           He was using isolating behaviours; one minute I'd be told that I shouldn't be  
326 talking to a colleague...the next minute I'd be told that it was all ok...I would get  
327 my work constantly scrutinised, and he basically micro managed people until they  
328 couldn't do anything.

329           Les described his initial inability to recognise that he was being targeted with bullying  
330 by his senior executive manager:

331 It took me a while to realise that she [the senior executive] had effectively put a  
332 black ban on me, she would veto them [my job applications] without anything in  
333 writing.

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

335 It was a difficult five months because everyone knew about the accusation, my  
336 reputation was tainted.

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

338 There was a cloud over me. Many of the local GPs in the area they thought that I  
339 was under suspicion. It was impacting on my professional work and my livelihood.

#### 340 **Psychological Vulnerability and Distress**

341 *Psychological vulnerability and distress* also consistently emerged as a theme across  
342 participants, and captured the cumulative effect of derailment.

343 I was overloaded with work, and then the false bullying and harassment claim were  
344 made against me ... I didn't spring back, I didn't come back from those claims, and  
345 I eventually fell over ... and I had strong suicidal tendencies. (Chris)

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

348 I suddenly slipped down hill in a big way ... I used to fly off the handle pretty  
349 easily, once, a couple of times I got into the car and took off, and disappeared for  
350 an hour, and there were a couple of times I felt like driving the car into a tree, in  
351 that 12 month period. (Liam)

352 Accustomed to accepting responsibility, the lack of validation and the insidiousness  
353 of bullying contributed to mental health difficulties:

354 I felt like a *failure* ... and I just went into I suppose a depressive spiral, over a  
355 period of about six months ... but I didn't recognise that I was depressed at the  
356 time. (Diana)

357           The powerlessness of their situations, and feelings of being unsupported in the  
358 workplace, led to behaviour that isolated the participants from their loved ones, and  
359 vicariously contaminated other areas of their lives. Participants were not able to cope with  
360 the changes and felt that others also did not understand what they were experiencing. Both  
361 Chris and Les described breakdowns in family relationships:

362           We were under pressure, the kids were stressed and didn't know what was going  
363 on ... and it was one of the reasons my marriage had come to an end. (Les)  
364 Struggling to manage the spiralling downwards sense-of-self in the aftermath of extreme  
365 invalidation, relationships suffered irreparable damage:

366           My anxiety and my poor reactions to some family members and their inability to  
367 understand my mental health, has caused a breakdown to those relationships.

368           (Chris)

369 The decision not to complain about the bullying or the false accusations of bullying  
370 contributed to regret and a lack of closure from two participants:

371           In hindsight and reflection, I should have gone outside the organisation, gone to an  
372 independent person or other Government agency and taken action against these  
373 individuals. (Chris)

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

375           I haven't entirely let it go, it's still quite an intrinsic part of my life but it just  
376 doesn't make it feel as depressed and as unhappy as it used to. (Diana)

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

378           I should have stood my ground and basically said "no" ... I should have allowed  
379 some things to fall over, and that would have proven that it didn't work. But I  
380 proved that it did work for a couple of years because I did it, but it was at the  
381 expense of my health.

382 **Meaning-making and Personal Growth**



383 Participants reported that re-appraisals of new meanings were achieved after  
384 experiencing self-awareness and moments of self-realisation, and mobilisation of internal  
385 agency:

386 12 months later, I read an article ... on psychopathic bullies ... it made me feel a  
387 lot better, I actually finally felt that I had something I could hold on to, to describe  
388 what had happened (Diana)

389 Moments of self-realisation clarified that the fears of ongoing bullying were irrational,  
390 providing increased awareness and relief from the emotional pain of self-doubt and self-  
391 blame:

392 I was fearful of meeting my old boss, literally fearful, the old sweaty hands thing,  
393 and I realised at that point that a lot of what I was feeling wasn't rational, and the  
394 churn I was having over this, and that was I suppose was a point of clarity to me.  
395 (Diana)

396 Les slowly began to regain his sense of direction and sought redress by taking action against  
397 what he felt was an attack on his integrity and livelihood. He began to re-honour himself and  
398 trust his judgement again:

399 It took me a year to wake up that this wasn't gonna go away ... It took me a while  
400 to wake up to the fact that unless I got to an external body to pass judgement on the  
401 whole issue, nothing was ever gonna change.

402 The distress of the burnout was reappraised as an opportunity for increased self-knowledge  
403 and better judgement:

404 The really important lesson that I've learned that in my life I've pushed myself too  
405 hard on too many fronts. (Chris)

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

408           The thing that I'll always remember is my doctor saying, "I understand what you're  
409           going through, I know what the problem is and I understand it all." (Liam)

410   In addition to describing the support she received from her partner, Diana in particular  
411   described the value of having a personal coach in providing her with practical solutions:

412           I think the personal coach has probably been the biggest impact. I mean time to  
413           some degree would almost certainly have moved me on and got me to a better  
414           place, but I think the personal coach helped the most.

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

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

417   In particular, Diana redefined herself:

418           I got a lot fitter and socialising with friends a lot more, I'd gone back to university  
419           ... I said ok I need to get fit, I need to look after myself a bit, was trying many of  
420           those [self-development] things, and reconnect with my friends ... I became a bit  
421           better saying well, I'm not coping with this at the moment, maybe take some  
422           workload off me.

423   One participant found a level of peace by defusing the anger, shame and pain and replacing  
424   them with forgiveness:

425           The importance of being able to forgive and move on is a very important lesson I  
426           have learned and still learning. (Chris)

427   Having experienced the distress of derailment, participants expressed their desire to help  
428   others who are going through similar life changing experiences:

429           I hope that sometime in the future I may have the ability to speak into the lives of  
430           others who have had a similar experience ... I can see and hope that it would be of  
431           assistance to others. (Chris)

432   Increased empathy was also reported by participants:

433 I find that I'm more aware of people; I can see the signs in people who are having  
434 trouble ... I think I'm far more tolerant of people who are finding it tough at work  
435 than I probably was if I hadn't gone through it. (Liam)

436 Significant changes in life purpose were reported. It appeared that by re-appraising her  
437 priorities, Diana's psychological flexibility allowed her to change her identity from a senior  
438 manager to a consultant. By making this difficult decision, a very positive change occurred  
439 as she described increased contentment:

440 This experience has been a key to personal growth, and it probably pushed the  
441 personal growth in a quite a different line to what might have happened if I had not  
442 been in that situation, if I had not have been in that situation. (Diana)

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

444 I suppose I stopped fighting with myself on a lot of things. I actually got a lot  
445 happier and more content ... I stopped being so task focused, and started sleeping  
446 again which was good ... and I was probably not as productive as I am now as  
447 well. (Diana)

448 New meanings involved regaining the feelings of spirituality and connectedness, and re-  
449 gaining a sense of identity:

450 In my early twenties I had a quite a strong sense of self, and I felt I'd actually lost it  
451 in the corporate climb and, I think that this [the derailment experience] gave me an  
452 opportunity to regain some of that. (Diana)

453 One participant regained his subjective self-worth by rechanneling his energy from fighting  
454 change to adapting to the change, and re-gaining recognition for his work in an alternate  
455 field:

456 I get a lot of satisfaction from what I'm doing now, I'm contributing back to the  
457 industry ... I think the experience that I gained since I've left has made me a better  
458 person. (Liam)

459 For another, the decision to make a formal complaint and stand up against perceived injustice  
460 was related to better outcomes and more closure. Perceptions of increased resilience, self-  
461 worth, and authenticity surfaced:

462 I'm far more prepared if there was ever such a second event, that I would be far  
463 more assertive and aggressive and much much quicker at not letting the issue drag  
464 on ... I'm pleased I stuck it out. I would always have had the doubt that maybe she  
465 was right, maybe I wasn't performing up to scratch ... I really would have always  
466 had a cloud over me that in some way I just wasn't performing appropriately.

467 (Les)

## 468 **Discussion**

469 This study provides an insider's lens on career derailment in high level  
470 executives/professionals. Such understanding is important for coaching psychologists,  
471 particularly how these experiences provide opportunities for new meaning making, and  
472 personal and professional growth. Specifically, the implications for coaching psychologists  
473 include the importance of being aware of the early warning signs of burnout in high  
474 functioning individuals, the importance of acting on these signs with psychological flexibility  
475 as early as possible, but in a way that helps the executive to find new and more purposeful  
476 direction. The notion that career derailment may provide a springboard for positive change is  
477 a novel result and one that has significant implications for executive coaching.

478 Traditionally, the experiences that arise from career derailment such as burnout have  
479 been discussed in relation to which remedial clinical interventions might best be able to help  
480 the individual. Coaching psychologists are well placed to recognise and refer onwards when  
481 other services are needed. However, our research suggests that there is a larger coaching role  
482 in which the client can be helped to draw on their agency towards positive psychological  
483 outcomes. As such, coaching that facilitates self-questioning, openness to change, and  
484 maintains a growth-mindset may best help the executive overcome adversity and move

485 forward more purposefully. As highlighted by Webb (2006), coaches can tap into the  
486 different stages of the lifespan and promote change as part of a life adventure that can inform  
487 executive wisdom. Specifically, applications from positive psychology and the field of  
488 posttraumatic growth which help clients to harvest hope, identify change, and re-author their  
489 lives seem relevant (Joseph, 2011).

490 The current research offers an in-depth and rigorous qualitative investigation of four  
491 participants but further research is needed. First, there is a need for research into what makes  
492 for effective coaching following career derailment, but also to understand more fully what  
493 defines successful coaching. The benefits that arose for these participants following  
494 derailment appear to be as much related to changes in personal direction and new priorities in  
495 life as they are to do with the enhancement of their career. Future research with executives  
496 who report personal and professional growth subsequent to derailment might specifically  
497 probe for what it is that they found helpful in making this transition from a state of distress  
498 and vulnerability and to explore the relevance of the concept of posttraumatic growth.

499 Second, qualitative studies do not offer generalisability. However, there is no reason to  
500 expect that our findings will not apply to other groups of professionals where derailment has  
501 occurred due to extrinsic factors i.e., bullying or organisational restructuring. What is less  
502 certain is whether growth is as likely when derailment occurs as a result of intrinsic  
503 personality attributes of the individual. Future research could specifically examine the  
504 experiences of individuals following executive derailment caused by intrinsic factors.

505 Third, it is important for organisations to understand that the cost of executive  
506 derailment is high. For that reason, organisations need to be aware of the risks to their  
507 executive staff of derailment when carrying out organisational restructuring. When  
508 derailment is due to re-organisational strategies, organisations could promote flexible and  
509 creative opportunities to redefine identities and grow psychologically and keep on track those

510 who might otherwise derail, contributing to retention of valuable individuals. Similarly,  
511 bullying at the executive level requires specific procedural and psychological support. When  
512 bullying is responsible for derailment an organisation can lose a high functioning individual  
513 who is the victim of bullying but retain the perpetrator, who may continue to disrupt  
514 productivity. Early identification of disruptive and bullying behaviours is essential. In both  
515 these situations, coaching psychologists are able to bring independent and fresh perspectives.

516         Finally, organisations need to recognise that derailment experiences are common and  
517 work towards reducing the stigma that may be attached to it, and to understand that when  
518 derailment occurs it can actually provide opportunities for the personal and professional  
519 growth of the executive which in turn can be to the benefit of the organisation.

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624 **Notations:**

625 [ ... ] Indicates editorial elision where non-relevant material has been omitted

626 [ - ] Indicates pauses in speech by participant

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

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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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 638 **Table 2**  
 639 *Semi structured Interview questions prompts*

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

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