

Demoted

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

You've been in your job long enough to own it. Something about work hasn't felt quite right for a few weeks. You haven't been able to put your finger on it except your boss has seemed to avoid you. Today you got the bombshell: you're being demoted.

Oh, your boss put bells and whistles on it, "The organization is making some changes ... your position, responsibility, territory will change ..." This was followed by, "We know this will be a blow to you, if you decide not to take this new territory (in the farthest, most remote region of the country), we'll understand if you have to leave." Or, there were encouraging words. "We think you can turn this dog of a time slot around."

Your morning bagel sits like fiery lead in your belly, as this unspoken truth slides in.

Demoted! **They may kept you at your salary level or lowered you.** Your office and staff will change, get smaller, or disappear. You have to face every day the realization that they didn't think you were doing your job or that you weren't one of the pieces they were fighting for on the company chess board.

How do you interpret what you just heard? If they said, "We want you to turn this dog of a product (or territory) around," they might actually mean that. It's a kind of hazing ritual for up and comers. You need to prove yourself, get your hands dirty, show 'em how bad you want the brass ring. They won't say this to you after 40.

If they said, "We think things will change in a few months," they mean, "We believe in you, but we're watching."

If they said, "You need to spend some time in the trenches," it could be true. It could also mean you're being buried. If the product or territory goes down, so do you. Don't lose hope, but they are shaky about you. Something in your performance troubles them. They won't die if you leave. If they gave you an impossible task and no resources, you might as well order your bye-bye cake.

How will you manage you? Consider why this happened, and please be honest with yourself. Did it happen because of you? Are you truly tired of this job and just lack the courage to quit? A major slide in performance often accompanies this inner struggle. Have your relationships gone sour and can you salvage them? If yes, then bandage up your ego and go. If no, start looking for your next job. If it's really the organization, you should feel okay, but you'll struggle in coming to grips with your lower position on the corporate totem pole.

How will you cope? First, have a private honesty session with yourself, away from the friends who will josh you into rationalizations and away from the spouse who may be too scared to be of immediate help. Sit in your car and sulk. Close the door to the den and write a dialogue with yourself about it. Decide what the deal is and what you intend to do about it.

Next, talk with people who can help you get out or get through it. Either way, you'll need a strategy. A career coach can help you put your best face on it and your best focus forward. Often your spouse and friends are just your cheerleaders because this is often too tough a challenge for them.

Third, be kind to yourself. You'll feel depressed, ashamed, fearful, **EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT AT FAULT**. This is a terrible thing to go through. Expect the feelings, ride with them; understand that they'll pass fairly quickly, like the flu.

Fourth, face the monster. Put together the story you can live with, and don't be surprised if you — an honest guy, can't be frank and open, but need to spin your story. This cut, sliced to the bone, and took a chunk of you.

Next, go to the new job, whether it's the new territory, department, or office; preferably on a Saturday. Your ravaged face can have privacy and get accustomed to this unexpected circumstance. Set your watch for two weeks hence. You'll feel mostly better by then, because resilient humans do recover.

Demotion can work, especially if you **KNOW** there are no new jobs readily at hand for you. You'll settle in. Demotion can also be the organization's subtle hint to leave (some subtlety!). If you can't take it, and you have other job options, then resign, but with class. Don't go raging out the door. It changes nothing, just leaves a sour memory of you.