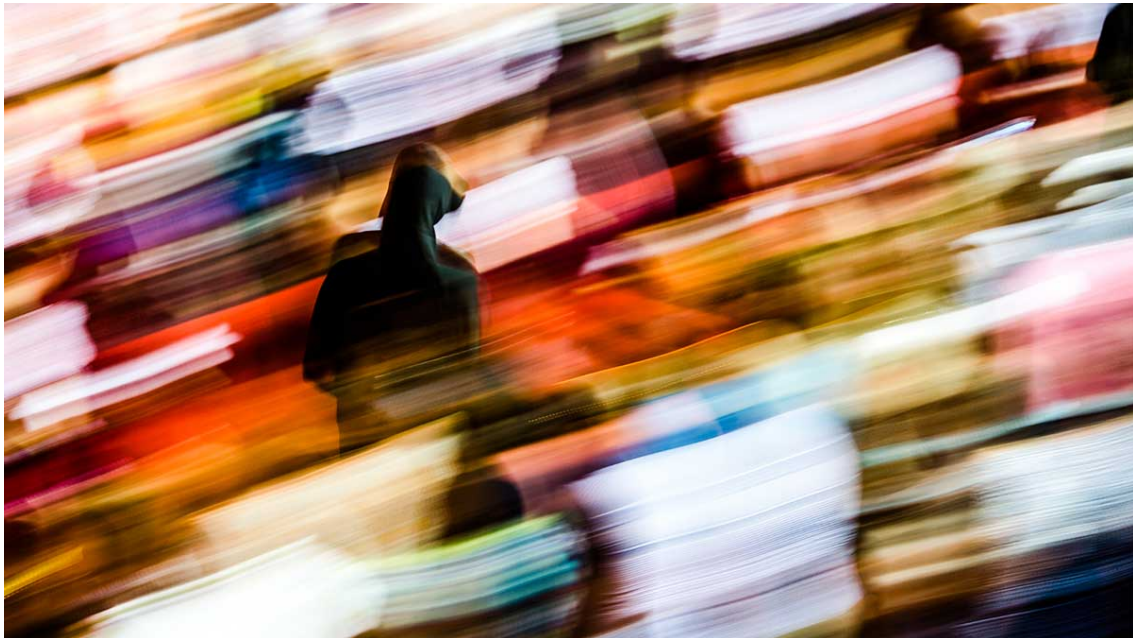


**Professional Transitions**

# **Getting Your Career Back on Track After a Catastrophic Error**

by Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel

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Everyone makes mistakes at work. But some people's errors in judgment have huge implications, resulting in public firings or forced resignations. Even people who make serious mistakes have to earn a living. How do you recover professionally from a terrible error in judgment?

First of all, recognize that you're not alone. In December 2015 the New York Times reported that many of Wall Street's best and brightest attended a fundraising dinner at the Hilton's New York Grand Ballroom. The keynote speaker was Michael Milken.

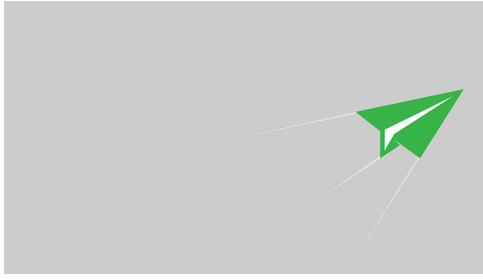
Twenty-seven years earlier, the New York Times had a less flattering story, declaring, "A serious criminal problem has infected Wall Street." Mr. Milken had built a junk-bond empire that brought him more than \$1 billion from 1983 to 1987. Prosecutors said Mr. Milken cheated clients and stockholders, manipulated the marketplace and tricked a corporation into being taken over. He was eventually sentenced to ten years in prison and paid \$1.1 billion in fines (though, in the end, he served less than two years and paid far less in fines). Plus, he was permanently barred from the securities industry.

After his release from prison, Michael Milken co-founded what was originally called the Knowledge Universe (now named KinderCare Education), the largest for-profit childcare provider in the country. Certainly, given Milken's wealth, he had more options than most to reinvent himself. But there are lessons anyone can draw from what he and others have done to revive their careers, whether after a serious criminal misstep or a different sort of major mistake.

### **Overlay History With Your Story**

Milken could not alter history, but he could create his own story to overlay it. He became the co-founder of the Milken Family Foundation and Chairman of the Milken Institute. He is now well known for funding research into melanoma, cancer, and other life threatening diseases. "Michael Milkin, criminal" was overlayed by "Michael Milkin, philanthropist." We are not implying that Milken was cynically acting the role of philanthropist; he and members of his family have suffered from cancer. We should assume his passion in fostering medical research is genuine. It was also quite effective in overlaying one narrative on top of another.

## Career Transitions



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Take another example. A client we worked with, a senior pharmaceutical VP, was accused of violating U.S. law for attempted bribery of foreign officials. The executive was quietly fired. And like Milken, he couldn't remove that firing and the reason for it from history.

Our client took what he called a "sabbatical" and used his time to help Syrian children stranded on the Greek island of Lesbos. While on Lesbos, he wrote a blog about his experiences. He became a

public spokesman for a world that seemed to be turning its back on these refugees.

A year after his sabbatical, our client resumed his career as a consultant to the pharmaceutical industry. A year later, he was hired by one of his clients.

## Create a New Internet Trail

It's not enough to just create a new story. You have to make sure that it replaces what's out there about you. Negative news stories and comments from unhappy people you have dealt with will find their way onto the internet and into social media — and you can bet that recruiters and hiring managers will find them. If you search your name and all you see is negativity, you have to do your best to bury it.

Get a website with your name. Update your LinkedIn profile. Create a blog that allows you to talk about your new passion. It's not difficult with the off-the-shelf options out there to get started with both a

website and a blog. With some time and effort, the unfavorable stories about you will hopefully appear on pages two or three of a web search.

## **What to Say to Future Employers**

Many people in these situations wonder how they should address the firing with potential employers. Pat Lynch, owner of the Atlanta outplacement firm Frontier Group, counsels his clients that “less is more” when discussing a blemish. If you can avoid the discussion in networking meetings or job interviews, then do so.

There are, however, times when you cannot skirt the issue. You may be asked to explain obvious chronological gaps in resumes or a recruiter may unearth the info online or through references. Or perhaps you have to fill out an employment application that asks if you’ve ever been found guilty of a felony. Don’t lie — getting caught would be grounds for termination with cause and then you have to deal with two errors of judgment. And definitely don’t blame others; you may sincerely view the error as unavoidable or not your fault. But although people may aid victims, they seldom hire them.

If you must discuss the situation, point the finger at yourself and explain three things you learned from the experience. For example, you might say: “I take full responsibility. And I learned three things from my mistake: One, I require seven hours of sleep to make good decisions. Back then I was making decisions on 4-5 hours of sleep. Two, I need to write down the decision and let it sit for 24 hours before I open my mouth. President Harry Truman used to do that and it worked well for him. I do that now. And three, I review my decisions with a mental image of my father and ask myself, ‘Would he be proud that I made this decision?’”

Doing this shows in specific terms that you’ve reflected on your mistakes, have made changes, and that you are helping the prospective employer manage the risk of hiring you. Saying vague

things like, “I’ll never do that again” will not provide the necessary reassurance.

Susan Chritton, a San Francisco career coach and author of *Personal Branding for Dummies*, says, “I have found that if someone is likable and willing to own their mistakes people are more forgiving than we may think.”

Your lapse in judgment doesn’t need to be a career killer. Even if you wouldn’t hire someone who made the same mistake as you, many others are willing to give people second chances.

*Editor’s note: This piece was updated on May 17 to clarify the prison term served and punitive fines paid by Mr. Milken.*

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