Tips for Explaining a Job Loss
Kate Lorenz, CareerBuilder.com

Today, the words "you're fired" have become part of our popular culture, thanks to Donald Trump and "The Apprentice." And while contestants on the television show all seem to turn their public firings into lucrative job offers, the same is not always true for the rest of the "regular Joes" in corporate America.

If you have been fired, you may be afraid that your past will come back to haunt you in your next job interview. After all, you want to impress a potential new employer, and letting them know about a major failure isn't that impressive. But getting fired is not automatically a deal breaker. In fact, the book "We Got Fired...And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us," (Ballantine Books, 2004) includes interviews with well-known professionals who were fired in their past and used those experiences as catalysts to success.

So just how do you handle questions about your past? Here are a few strategies to try that might keep you on the "A list" when the interview is over.

1. Plan ahead to answer the question.
The best thing you can do is arrive at the interview ready to answer questions about your experience. Prepare in advance by thinking about your negative work experience. Why were you fired? What did you learn from the experience? What did you do right, and what did you do wrong? Try to look at the situation objectively and from the employer's point of view, as well as your own. You will get nowhere if you still harbor resentment about losing the job, and your negative feelings will come through in the interview.

2. Don't volunteer the information.
Lee E. Miller, president of NegotiationPlus.com, says it is utterly crucial to tell the truth, but you don't have to draw attention to this part of your past if you don't need to. "You have to be honest, but how you choose to phrase it is up to you," he says. This means that you don't have to state outright you were fired if the interviewer does not already know. It is acceptable – and advisable – to package the truth in a way that is most favorable to you.

For example, you can say you "left the company" or briefly mention that job and move on to your next position and what you accomplished there. Perhaps a simple, "It didn't work out and wasn't the best fit for me or the company," may be sufficient.

Keep in mind, however, that this tactic does not work in all situations. It works best if the firing was several jobs ago and you have more relevant job experience to discuss.

3. Explain the situation briefly, then focus on the positive.
If it is apparent that you were fired and you cannot get around the question, you need to briefly explain the situation and then move on.

Here is one example: "Our company went through a great deal of change in the time that I was employed, as did my department. Unfortunately, my new supervisor was in need of skills I did not possess at that time."

Once you have explained why you were let go, then it's time to move to the positive. For example: "Since that time I have continuously updated my skills to make myself a well-rounded contributor. I have taken additional computer classes, become involved with the industry's trade association, and feel that this job experience made me a better candidate in the long run."

The key here is pointing out what you learned from the experience, what you did proactively to improve yourself, and focusing on those positive things in the interview. "You must deal with the issue in a forward-thinking way," Miller says. This means learning from the past, but thinking about the future.

4. Stay positive, no matter what.
You may have been fired from your last job because you had the boss from hell or because you got stabbed in the back by a co-worker. Even if you got the short end of the stick, it is your job in the interview to stay positive and professional. "Never badmouth a company or prior supervisor," says Miller. Again, if you are asked about your former boss and have nothing good to say, bite your tongue for a minute and focus on your work and what you learned from the situation. Remember, a job interview is no place to vent about your negative experiences!

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