
Reinventing Yourself After a Setback



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How to survive a significant career defeat and rebuild your professional and personal life.

Al Gore famously opened his speeches and the award-winning documentary film “An Inconvenient Truth” with the same quip: "I'm Al Gore, I used to be the next President of the United States." The former Vice President, often described as one of the most powerful in American history, failed to secure the US presidency in 2000. Although he won the popular vote, he lost to his opponent in the electoral college after a fateful and contested recount in Florida and a decision by the Supreme Court in December 2000.

Despite this setback, Gore famously managed to reinvent himself and establish a thriving career as one of the world's most prominent environmentalists. An INSEAD [case study](#) outlines how instead of retiring from public life, Gore drew on his political, social and economic networks and the various sources of power he accumulated over the years to rebuild his reputation and start an entirely new career.

But is the ability to reinvent oneself only available to those at the top, like Gore, who have enough clout to quickly move forward in life? While Gore successfully recovered from defeat by reframing his career, those facing significant setbacks sometimes encounter the additional challenge of overcoming stigma and must redefine themselves as well as their circumstances. In a recent research project, we explored how people in these situations managed to bounce back.

Individuals with a criminal record, for instance, face limited resources and opportunities to reconstruct their professional life. This was the situation for Shelley Winner, who turned her life around in prison after a long history of drug abuse. We were drawn to her case because of her resilience and thriving career at Microsoft. She has also **attracted significant media attention**. While Winner's story is extreme, it holds valuable lessons for those of us encountering any kind of setback in our lives or careers.

Rebuilding from rock bottom

In our discussions with Winner, she recounted her problematic childhood: Her father introduced her to alcohol at age 11 and she started using drugs during her teenage years. She spent over a decade drifting from one high to another, selling and later trafficking drugs to sustain her addiction. This eventually led to her incarceration. With a four-year prison sentence ahead of her, Winner made a conscious decision to reprogramme her heart and mind.

While in prison, she took advantage of every class and programme available to her and surrounded herself with individuals who were committed to turning their lives around. Upon her release, she entered a halfway house in San Francisco with a renewed determination and her sights set on a job in tech.

Winner became a straight-A student in computer science and joined a job-readiness programme for formerly incarcerated individuals. Here, she connected with two women at Microsoft who advocated for her employment, eventually leading to her being offered a position at a Microsoft store. She fought hard to land the job, seeking assistance from the **Fair Chance Ordinance** in San Francisco, and within a short period her dedication and skills earned her a promotion to a technical role.

Winner continued her advocacy work, volunteering and speaking out about

fair-chance hiring. The next significant step in her career was transitioning to a corporate role, although she claimed she encountered another hurdle during a background check. However, a senior executive, impressed by her [TED talk on hiring formerly incarcerated individuals](#), championed her cause and ensured her successful transition.

Currently thriving in a sales position, Winner consistently exceeds her targets, wins awards and earns a healthy six-figure salary. Her advocacy work has also sparked positive change within Microsoft: The company has joined the [Second Chance Business Coalition](#), a group of large private-sector firms committed to expanding the hiring and advancement of people with criminal records.

Winner's story serves as a powerful inspiration for navigating significant setbacks. It reminds us of the fragility of our circumstances and the importance of approaching life with mindfulness.

How to reinvent yourself after a setback

Research in macro-organisational behaviour provides a framework for understanding how individuals can rebuild their lives and careers. There are five key aspects: architecture (or structure), culture, power and influence (including networks), identity and guiding principles. Winner's journey exemplifies the application of these elements in the face of adversity. Anyone confronting a significant setback can turn their life around by tapping into these five elements.

1. Structure

Familiarise yourself with the institutions, rules and routines you can leverage to fight back and overcome setbacks. Winner turned her weaknesses into strengths and embodied humility, diligence, intellect and grit. She used discipline and focus as the structural underpinnings in her endeavours, for example by using legal frameworks in her favour.

2. Culture

Read the room and understand the rules and values of the place or context you are aiming to get to. If you want to reinvent yourself, it's crucial to learn how to navigate within these rules and values to be accepted by the relevant audience. By shifting her focus towards the tech sector, which values mavericks and outliers, Winner elevated her chances of acceptance.

3. Influence and meaningful relations

Focus on convincing and creating coalitions with people who can support and protect you. Seek perspectives and engage in meaningful discussions with friends and allies. Winner's journey involved connecting with individuals who advocated for her. She created an alternative network and invested significant effort in engaging and convincing those she was able to meet and influence.

4. Resilience from identity

Tap into your inner strength, motivation and determination that stem from your unique (and possibly evolving) identity. Surround yourself with people who are going to challenge you as well as encourage you, such as trusted mentors that will support a willingness to change. Winner embraced her past experiences, redefined her identity and used her newfound determination to reframe herself and her circumstances.

5. Guiding principles

Those who recover from setbacks and reinvent themselves often have a strong sense of mission. Winner's faith provided her with the guiding principles to persevere and thrive. Similarly, Gore was driven by a mission to save the planet. Identifying and aligning with this mission, and the values driving you, underpins your own authentic leadership.

To better equip yourself for reinvention after a setback, it is crucial to manage anger and transform it into positive energy. Creating a disciplined and mindful lifestyle – one that's centred on studying, reflecting and reinventing oneself from the beginning – is key to developing new skills. It is possible to forge new identities, regardless of past mistakes or situations.

Ultimately, rebuilding requires a sense of mission, hope and optimism. By integrating these insights and lessons into our own lives, we can navigate setbacks with resilience, transform our circumstances and embark on a journey of personal and professional reinvention. This approach is not limited to individuals in privileged positions such as Gore, but holds true for anyone, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Read an extended version of this article [here](#).

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