

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

# Use Failure as an Opportunity to Reflect on Your Strengths

by [Susan Peppercorn](#)

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In a presentation to a group of executive job seekers in transition, a recruiter made the point that after years of reviewing C-level résumés, she had noticed a commonality: None of these top professionals had escaped having some setbacks, rejections, or missed opportunities. This information surprised the audience of recent layoff victims, who realized that they were in good company when

it came to career misfortune. The recruiter was right: Failures and regrets need not derail your career, and, in fact, can propel it forward if handled wisely.

To find out how successful people dealt with situations when they didn't get what they wanted, I interviewed a range of accomplished consultants, coaches, and other business professionals, asking them: "What rejection did you experience that turned out for the best?"

When thinking back on jobs they weren't offered or turned down, graduate schools that didn't admit them, or promotions that went to someone else, all respondents agreed that they were better off in the long run. Although most were initially disappointed, gaining perspective over time helped them realize that those early frustrations afforded them the chance to try something different and to gain valuable insights.

One of my interviewees, self-reinvention thought leader Dorie Clark, explained that she was turned down by every doctoral program that she applied to. "I ultimately discovered that the minutiae of what a dissertation demands would have killed me," Clark said.

Gina Warner, CEO of the National AfterSchool Association, told me: "I didn't pass my bar exam the first time, which meant I couldn't accept the position I'd been offered at the district attorney's office. But it did mean I could volunteer on a U.S. Senate campaign, and when that candidate won I got hired to work for her, a much better opportunity for me."

Executive coach Nihar Chhaya was rejected by all of the top consulting firms he interviewed with when he was an MBA student at Wharton. "I took it pretty hard," he admitted. "When you're in the most competitive school, where everyone is asking who got what, you don't want to graduate without a job after investing all that work and money in a program you thought would make you set for

the future.” But in time, Chhaya realized that he had actually “dodged a bullet”: “I hustled and absorbed everything I could in my position at the Corporate Executive Board, realized that coaching and leadership assessment was my passion, and moved to build a career there.”

These individual “aha” moments contain some universal truths that professionals at any level can benefit from. Here are three strategies for recovering and thriving when a career goal you once coveted slips away.

### **Acknowledge the Emotional Pain**

“Rejection often triggers painful emotional doubts about our own competence and self-worth, so we either try to avoid it or pretend that it doesn’t matter,” writes consultant Ron Ashkenas in his HBR article “Rejection Is Critical for Success.” But it’s important not to dismiss how you are feeling. Being rejected hurts, and the physiological response it creates in our bodies and minds is akin to physical pain. The reason a negative reaction or rejection causes such strong emotions traces back to our primitive history, when having to leave the tribe after a rebuttal might have resulted in physical danger or even death. If rejection didn’t hurt, our ancestors might have put themselves in harm’s way by storming off into the path of a wild animal or an armed enemy. When you recognize that the emotions you feel are both primal and normal, it can help you move past the ache faster.

### **Ask Yourself, “Was it me, was it them, or was it us?”**

When Chhaya was passed over as a consultant, his first response was to seek an explanation. Why did his classmates get hired and he didn’t? Was it something he did wrong or failed to do? Or was it that the interviewer couldn’t see his potential and the value he brought to the table? The reality is that when you aren’t chosen for an opportunity, the reason often is a problem with fit – such as a values mismatch between you and the other party – rather than something that you (or someone else) did wrong.

Chhaya eventually came to realize that his real interest lay in coaching. “I don’t think I would be where I am today if I had gotten the acceptance back then, because it never would have made me want to push for my own passion versus compete with what I think I ‘should’ have done relative to my classmates,” he said. There’s an added benefit to this shift in thinking: Recent studies confirm that

when people attribute setbacks to lack of fit instead of blaming themselves or another person involved, they're less likely to give up and more motivated to improve.

## **Embrace Your Strengths**

Following Dorie Clark's rejection from PhD programs, she started writing and consulting, areas of strength and interest for her. Today she is the author of three best-selling books, writes for major publications, and has a thriving consulting business. Recognizing that a PhD wasn't the only chance for success, Clark let go of her first dream in order to spot the next one, so she could maximize her talents without regret. If you look back for too long, rather than soldiering on in a direction where your talents can shine, you risk the possibility of neglecting fresh opportunities. Consider Gina Warner's decision to volunteer for a U.S. Senate campaign instead of dwelling on not passing the bar exam. Making a conscious effort to look forward rather than back can lead to personal growth and the discovery of creative options.

Being able to identify the silver lining in a perceived failure or missed opportunity can help you move on to bigger and better things – while maintaining your self-confidence in the process. As Wharton professor Adam Grant puts it: “We are more than the bullet points on our résumés. We are better than the sentences we string together into a word salad under the magnifying glass of an interview. No one is rejecting us. They are rejecting a sample of our work, sometimes only after seeing it through a foggy lens.”



Susan Peppercorn is an executive career transition coach and speaker. She is the author of *Ditch Your Inner Critic at Work: Evidence-Based Strategies to Thrive in Your Career*. Numerous publications including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, the Boston Globe, and SELF Magazine have tapped her for career advice. You can download her free Career Fit Self-Assessment and 25 Steps to a Successful Career Transition.

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**Suhasini Gudala** a month ago

Thanks for this encouraging article, Susan. I am currently in a phase of continuous rejections and I keep taking them to heart every time. I shall start implementing these strategies. Hopefully I would find my aha moment soon

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