



## Stumbling in Life and Leadership Recovering after a Fall

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

**The Scene.** A former graduate student of mine recently sent me a link to David Brooks' [article](#), "The Moral Bucket List." I haven't been the same since reading it. I sat at the desk afterward, my head spinning with the implications.

You know how you bump into a piece of writing every so often that shakes you up, that opens an interior space you didn't know you had until the right combination of words and imagery unlocks it?

Brooks' article did that for me.

**Radiation of Light.** The author and I share an admiration for people of deep character and virtue, people who radiate an inner light.

"These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued. You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude. They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all," he states.

He further asserts that such people are "made, not born." The manufacturing process contains a slow build of moral and spiritual accomplishments. The list of accomplishments he then describes is well worth the time it will take to read them. I found myself inspired. I've been fortunate enough to work with several leaders like this over my career.

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These individuals' life paths are characterized not by a smooth progression of triumphs, Brooks suggests, but, rather, "a pattern of defeat, recognition, redemption. They have moments of pain and suffering. But they turn those moments into occasions of radical self-understanding." Moreover, "the people on this road see the moments as pieces of a larger narrative."

And then the hook, the concept that has captured my imagination ever since my first reading of it several months ago: "This is a philosophy for stumblers," he concludes.

**Reader**

Raise your hand if you are a serial stumbler.

**Participation**

My hand is raised. Is yours? Okay, put it down. I just did. Makes it kind of hard to type, for one thing.

I've been doing a lot of reflecting about stumbling lately - both in my own life and in the lives of some of the leaders I am coaching. Catching our toes on the carpet edges of life every so often seems inevitable, despite our attempts to carefully nail down every edge as we lay it.

So how do we stumble without falling? Or perhaps more realistically, how can we most efficiently and effectively recover when we do stumble and fall? It can be humbling enough to nurse the resulting carpet burns in private; those in leadership positions often contend with the additional

pressure of various stakeholders' reactions to their more public stumbles.

**Graceful Recovery.** Brooks' article (based on his book, [The Road to Character](#)) provides some pointers on how to work through this pattern of defeat, recognition and redemption based on his observations of people of character. While his insightful recommendations should help all of us aim high in terms of building our internal character (e.g. our "eulogy virtues") over a lifetime, the intention behind the list presented here is a bit more practical.

I've compiled some suggestions for small practices you can use day-to-day to more gracefully recover after a stumble, based on experiences drawn from my own herky-jerky life path, my observations as a leadership coach, and some relevant psychological research.

My hope is that you'll find one or two of these approaches worth trying, if they aren't already in your individual tool kit.

## Tips for Recovering from a Good Old-Fashioned Stumble

**1.** Adopt a Third Person Viewpoint. How do you talk to yourself during and after stumbles? What does your internal chatter sound like? This is more than an idle question (or a hilarious premise for an episode of Seinfeld called "The Jimmy").

In a startlingly wonderful [exploration of self-talk](#) during our toughest moments, psychologist Ethan Kross and others have demonstrated that talking to ourselves in third person during challenging moments can lessen our anxiety and lead to "enormous effects" in performance/recovery. And it may also be the quicker path to post-stumble wisdom. How does such a seemingly simple switch in our internal narrative accomplish such positive results?

When addressing ourselves by name (e.g. "Deb, you really need to get it together here! Take a deep breath and focus!") as opposed to first person (e.g. "I need to get it together here, take a deep breath and focus!"), we gain some much-needed emotional distance, alleviating the cerebral cortex-hijacking effects of intense emotion. The result is more effective problem solving and quicker recovery. Kross describes this approach as talking to ourselves like we would a friend, which helps us de-personalize the situation and broaden our perspective.

One quick additional piece of guidance here since we're keeping this practical: if you are prone to vocalizing your third person self-talk out loud, as I am, you may want to reserve that for private moments or when in the company of trusted others. (For an example of how awkward or just plain annoying it can be if you put a lot of that kind of talk out into the world, [see the Seinfeld clip](#) referenced above.)

**2. Dust off Your 1970's Self Affirmations.** Turns out that Stuart Smalley from Saturday Night Live was right: by arming ourselves with positive affirmations, we better respond to and recover from stumbles.

In another [interesting set of studies](#), psychologists Clayton Crichton and David Dunning found that positive self-affirmations buffer the effect of negative, ego threatening situations that were set up to feel like failures. Experimental subjects who were first asked to write about a values-based area of their life (e.g. adventure, financial success) and why it was meaningful to them before experiencing a variety of failure inductions were shown to be less defensive and have a more positive sense of self-worth afterward than those who didn't.

Generalizing from there, the authors propose that the mechanism at play is not simply about the value of the good feelings created by positive self-statements (think [Stuart Smalley](#) again, "I am good enough, I am smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!"). Rather, the real value exists in the broadening of perspective that takes place when we focus on those values

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or sources of meaning that guide us outside the current situation (e.g. "So, I really stumbled on that presentation to the management committee. But the innovation behind the new product line I was pitching represents some of my team's best thinking. I know we have good ideas and a track record of seeing them through to development. That's the work I love to do as a leader.") In essence, we must remind ourselves that we are defined by much more than the current situation.

Bottom line here, by reminding ourselves that we have additional meaningful qualities or areas of our life that exist outside the single stumble situation, our sense of self is maintained or even enlarged despite the setback.

**3. Hit the Pause Button.** When we've stumbled, the temptation to move on from the experience as quickly as possible frequently looms large. We want nothing more than to put the event and associated feelings behind us, eager to redeem ourselves . . . or at least to lessen the embarrassment. So we leap to our feet, look around to see who else might have noticed our fall, and start race walking again.

Moving from stumble back to action is both necessary and adaptive. Yet particularly for leaders and others whose lives have been at least partially defined by a long history of achievement and driving ever forward, hitting the pause button can arrest what could otherwise become a

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serial stumble, variations on an unconscious theme.

By creating some contemplative space around the stumble, we can mine the experience for valuable nuggets of learning that otherwise would remain buried. And discover how to better lead ourselves and others from it.

The pause button can be hit mid-stumble, immediately post-stumble or any time thereafter (there is no statute of stumble limitations, I checked). Find a quiet time in your schedule to reflect on the experience. Then move onto Tip #4.

**4. Make Meaning.** For regular readers of my blogs, this tip may sound familiar. As continual authors of our self-narratives, we have an opportunity to consciously create meaning out of a good old-fashioned face plant, instead of letting events, our habits of mind, or others make that meaning for us.

Begin the meaning making process by outlining the objective facts of the stumble situation - a time & events recap of sorts. Absolutely no interpretation allowed in this step (we'll get to that next). If it helps you to distinguish fact from interpretation,

draw the outline on a whiteboard or sit down at your keyboard to type it.

Then step back from the facts and move into narration, almost as if you were telling the story to someone else. What thoughts and feelings did you have as those events were occurring? What role(s) did other people play in it? [What are the likely consequences of the stumble?](#) What potential causal and contributing factors may have been at play?

Next, and most importantly, sit back and consider your story from the vantage point of a listener. In so doing, observe both your narration (the story) and the narrator (who is telling it). What might feel familiar about either of these factors? What behavioral patterns, values, parts of self, and/or life themes might be on display? And what do you want to do with any of that: are you comfortable with the insights that emerge in this step of pausing? In other words: is graceful recovery simply about bandaging your knees and moving on from the stumble - or is some deeper repair work needed?

Last, how might you want to lead any differently on the basis of these reflections? Take some of the insights

you've formed and turn them outward. This is your chance to consciously [create both personal and leadership meaning](#) around the stumble.

The practices involved in meaning making, while powerful, can be time consuming, so you might reserve it for your bigger stumbles.

## A Front

## Row Seat.

In a very poignant scene from my early career, I was in the audience as a CEO, who was scheduled to address an all-employee meeting about a spin-off of a major portion of the company (leading to job displacements and months of demanding work to separate business operations), stepped to the podium only to find that the microphone was not working. In an unguarded moment, he proceeded to let a few choice expletives fly as he raised the issue with several facilities' staff members who were hovering near the stage. The idle chatter in the first several rows of the audience turned into silence as the facilities staff scurried to fix the problem. I think we were all busy mentally placing ourselves in the shoes of those facilities' employees.

Once the microphone was operational (involving a twenty-minute delay), the CEO took the stage again. He placed his notes aside, stared quietly out at the audience for a long moment, and then proceeded to apologize to the facilities staff (addressing each of them by name), as well as to the entire employee base, for his

conduct. A number of the audience members hadn't even overheard the tirade but he provided a high level recounting of it (leaving the expletives out this time). He went on to share that, while it was absolutely not an excuse, the stress level that accompanied the kind of communication he was there to make was weighing heavily upon him. As he talked, his sincerity and openness about his state of mind (and heart) was striking.

## **Personal and leadership growth seldom occur without the occasional stumble.**

While I have no way of knowing what happened for him in that twenty minute break he had, I'd like to think he hit the "pause button" to gain some much-needed perspective, mentally replaying the events that had just occurred. Then perhaps he reminded himself of the type of leader he aspired to be, in alignment with his deeper values or the broader legacy he hoped to leave behind . . . in third person self-talk, for good measure.

What I do know is that while his shocking leadership "stumble" has remained indelibly etched on my memory, so too has his sincere effort to recover from it. And his willingness to share the humanity behind it.

**Bringing It Home.** Personal and leadership growth seldom occur without the occasional stumble. If it's hard for you to relate to that statement, you might want to ask yourself if you are playing it too safe – walking well-worn paths that you could navigate blind-folded or simply standing in place.

For the rest of us, particularly those who qualify for the "Serial Stumblers' Society", the opportunity to convert that

stumble into a moment of grace sits just below the surface, beyond the reach of our tendency to rush back into action.

Raise your hand if, instead of holding yourself to an impossible standard of being stumble proof, you'd rather invest energy in an effective recovery plan.

My hand is raised. Is yours?



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