

The White Box Club HANDBOOK

Simple Tools For Career Transition



Michael Thomas Sunnarborg

PREFACE

Here's the deal. This past spring, I had a moment of truth. You know, one of those moments where your entire life comes to a screeching halt and you are suddenly staring at yourself in the mirror, asking the question, "Now what?"

After publishing a series of books about finding better balance in life, I was working on a manuscript for my next book. And although writing and speaking are my passions, working a full-time job keeps gas in my tank and food on my table. These are just the realities of life.

Then one morning, without any notice, I was told that my full-time job was over. I couldn't believe it. I loved my job and the people I worked with each day. I wasn't prepared to leave it so suddenly. I never thought this would happen to me.

I decided to use this experience as a learning opportunity. Just as the proverbial phrase suggests, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade." This book is the lemonade.

My hope is that the personal observations, insights, and stories I've used to help me get through this challenging, yet powerful, experience will help you navigate through your career transition. Sometimes the only way to truly learn from something is to fully experience it. This book can help you to embrace the events of your life, ride the waves of change, and come out better for it in the end.

Life goes on!

Michael Thomas Sunnarborg
September 2015

INTRODUCTION

A layoff or career transition is a major life event. It's a big deal for anyone.

Sometimes during major life events, we want to hurry up and get through the discomfort without taking time to respond thoughtfully and deliberately to the situation. A sudden career transition is a good example of this. If we are triggered into fear, our first response might be to frantically rush out and take any job—anything to keep our income flowing and our lifestyle uninterrupted. Or, we can choose a different response.

This book is about walking down that different path.

In the following pages we will be discussing how to respond to career transitions in gentle, self-aware, and thoughtful ways so that the next step on your career path is a positive one. Doesn't that feel like a more mature and mindful approach?

You have the potential to experience a healthy career transition no matter where you are on your journey, but in order to move through something, you first need to accept it. Sometimes acceptance doesn't come easily—it takes courage, dedication, and commitment. Integration comes in small steps. By seeking to understand yourself better, learning to focus your energy, and practicing new healthy habits, you can get through anything, especially something as challenging as a career transition.

There are three parts to this book, each focusing on one of three stages of awareness, alignment, and activation. Each chapter explores an aspect of the career transition process, primarily focused on how to survive and bounce back

after a layoff. Each chapter has been written to gently shift your perspective and provide you with helpful tools and exercises to assist you.

At the end of each chapter are bulleted summary points called a *Reality Check*, along with questions to ponder. You might find it useful to journal about the questions or simply mull them over during your day. They can also serve as a useful meditation focus. Simply bring the questions into your mind during your regular meditation practice and notice the thoughts that float up in response.

I've also added *Inner Affirmations*—positive messages for you to consider as you process the content from each chapter. These messages are coming from my inner voice, or “Wise Will,” and are the guiding thoughts that helped me get through this challenging life event. My hope is that they will help and guide you as well.

A few of the chapters have a Supplemental Exercise located in the back of the book. These exercises include helpful checklists or templates designed to enhance the chapter content.

One final note: The chapters address the process of career transition chronologically and will make the most sense if read in order—at least the first time through. Then after you've completed the book, you can return to any of the chapters or exercises to refresh yourself as needed.

A career transition, like any other major life event, can be a poignant and cathartic experience. It can also be a powerful opportunity to learn more about yourself and the world around you. It all depends on how you see it. Join me on this journey as I introduce some simple tools for career transition.

CHAPTER 1 — THE ANNOUNCEMENT

*Don't be afraid of change, because it is
leading you to a new beginning.*
— Joyce Meyers

My day started like any other Friday. I got into the office, unpacked my things, and started to prepare for the day. As I checked email, I noticed that an “urgent meeting” had been added on my calendar for 9:00 a.m. that morning. I thought to myself, *this must be about the new product changes. Great!* So at 9:00 a.m., I went to the conference room, took a seat, and waited patiently. At 9:05 a.m., our CEO quickly entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"I've called you together this morning to make an important announcement. We're taking a new direction with the company and all of you in this room are not included. You are being let go immediately. You will be given a severance package including any unused vacation, and HR will be contacting you to follow-up. There are boxes out front for you to take back to your desks, pack up your things, and leave the premises within the hour. We are sorry to do this, but it was a necessary step."

Announcements like this are not uncommon. Not anymore. While in the past our chances of being laid off from a job may have been rare, the speed of today's business and the exponential acceleration of technology have caused our world to change size and direction more rapidly than ever before. As companies react to these changes, they grow in some areas and shrink in others. And while many companies work hard to keep good talent, the odds are good that at some point, you'll be part of a group that no longer has a place in the business plan.

Midway through the announcement I started to think. *Wait a minute. This can't include me. This is about the other employees. I must have been invited to this meeting to help facilitate the process. Seriously, I just got a raise last month; I'm developing a whole new program for a new product; and I've been told how fantastic my work is, so this is obviously some sort of mistake. Right...?*

No. I was included, along with a room full of others. In less than 60 seconds it was over. We slowly rose from our chairs and left the room. No one spoke a word—there was only awkward silence.

What just happened?

Layoffs have been around since the beginning of employment, but in the rapidly changing landscape of our current business economy, they seem to be more common. Any worker could be laid off: corporate executive, janitor, teacher, or sales clerk. No one is immune to business restructuring.

First reactions to being laid off are usually, "Why me? What did I do wrong?" We may automatically assume we are to blame for this unexpected change when, in reality, the layoff had nothing to do with us, personally. Layoffs

are business decisions based on restructuring and realignment for business reasons and generally not based on personal performance. However, just because it is a business decision doesn't mean it doesn't *feel* personal. We are all human beings with feelings, so how can we *not* take something like this personally?

I was numb. I stopped at the front desk, picked up a white box and carried it to my desk. I looked around my office at everything I'd created over the last two and a half years, and suddenly realized it was no longer mine. Some people came over to hug me. I felt like I was dreaming. The whole situation felt surreal. It took everything in me just to stop, breathe, and start gathering up my things.

I had just become a member of ***The White Box Club***.

When we experience an intense moment or receive unexpected news, our tendency is to hold our breath. Holding the breath lets us experience a feeling of being in control—at least for the moment. But we eventually must exhale. Consciously breathing out can create a feeling of release. The act of exhaling allows us to relax and let go. Although breathing consciously is temporary, it can bring a bit of relief. Sometimes, breathing is all we can do.

In the moment of a layoff, it's virtually impossible to think. It's hard to remember that you have become wiser, larger, and more powerful than you were before this job. In the words of a former colleague, "You can lay off an employee, but you can't lay off their experience." Looking back on this in the future will remind you that it was a big event—a life-changing moment—and like all other major life events, **this too shall pass**.

REALITY CHECK

- If you've been laid off, it's not about you.
- You've done nothing wrong.
- Layoffs are a business decision.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1) How can I support myself during this difficult time?
- 2) How can I learn to accept this even though I can't control it?

INNER AFFIRMATIONS

"I don't need to figure out what's going to happen next for me right away. In due time I will find new direction, but for now I'm going to take time to step back, process, and reflect. Tomorrow is another day and another opportunity to recreate myself again.

In the meantime, I just need to breathe."

CHAPTER 2 — WHITE BOXES

*Start where you stand, and work with
whatever tools you may have at your command,
and better tools will be found as you go along.*
— George Herbert

Transitions are a part of life. But sudden transitions, especially when they come by surprise, can be shocking and traumatic. An unexpected layoff is such an event.

When a layoff transition is gradual, so is the consolidation process. But in a “white box” layoff, there isn’t time to sort and prioritize. The thought of sifting through months or years’ worth of materials and files in an hour seems preposterous. An immediate layoff isn’t about giving anyone time to organize and transition. It’s a clean break, a quick cut—and it slices through all company connections instantly: relationships, intellectual ties, and personal investment in the work are severed.

We all have *white box moments*: events that take us by surprise and force us to be present while not knowing what will happen next, leaving us stunned and utterly speechless.

We walk away from those moments with *white boxes*: containers that hold valuable personal property from past jobs, relationships, or other cathartic experiences. Although these boxes might be physical cartons filled with material objects, they're also containers filled with intangible things. White boxes are packed with memories and emotional triggers. And despite their powerful significance, they often stay packed away in basement storage rooms or back closets only to face their fate in a garbage can or dumpster in the foreseeable future.

Although white boxes contain evidence of endings, they also hold memories of new beginnings. White boxes contain powerful personal history. Sometimes those pockets of memories remind us of who we were and who we've become. They become the map tacks along our career path.

Within 20 minutes, I had finished packing my white box with the few items that belonged to me, grabbed my coat, and headed out the front door. And just like that, my career with the company was over: a grand total of 35 minutes from announcement to exit. My job had disappeared. And so had I.

I went out to my car, put my box in the trunk, and sat in the parking lot attempting to process what had just happened. I was stunned. My brain was trying to come up with a plan, but to no avail.

After about ten minutes, I drove home, placed my white box on the kitchen counter, sunk into the couch and stared blankly at the wall in silence. It was 10:00 a.m. on a Friday morning, but if you'd asked me what day or time it was, I couldn't have told you.

Besides the immediate shock, what I felt most at that moment was profound sadness. I just left a job I really

loved, and the people—both coworkers and customers—who came with it. I didn't get to finish a project I'd been working on for months. I didn't get to say goodbye to more than a handful of coworkers. I didn't get to notify any of my customers. **I didn't get any closure.** And now I was left to sort it out for myself.

Then the thoughts returned. *Why me? What did I do wrong? This wasn't supposed to happen to me. I coach people about how to deal with losing their job. I'm not supposed to be going through it myself!*

Then the reality returned. It did happen. It was me. I did nothing wrong. And now it's time for me to surrender to this experience.

REALITY CHECK

- Life consists of beginnings and endings.
- We all have white box moments and memories.
- Sometimes the best thing we can do is to simply acknowledge our feelings.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1) In what ways have other white box moments affected my life? How have they changed things for the better?
- 2) What are some of the emotions I've experienced during major life changes?

INNER AFFIRMATIONS

"Even though this experience feels surreal right now, I will acknowledge my feelings and not think too far ahead. I have always grown from conflict, and this can be an opportunity for positive change. I only need to believe that everything will be okay and that I can take one moment at a time."

CHAPTER 3 — MONEY MATTERS

The amount of money that a person has in his bank account is not determined by his starting capital but by his knowledge about money and his ability to manage it properly.

— Sunday Adelaja

A sudden layoff or job transition can be one of the most devastating experiences to happen to anyone; however, it can also be an opportunity to take advantage of the many support systems specifically put in place to help people through such transitions.

City, state, and federal institutions have created programs to provide financial and emotional support to people in need. Being in transition puts you directly in a position to receive benefits from these programs.

Whether you've been unexpectedly laid off or left your present employment for another reason, a task of utmost importance is to assess your current financial situation. It is imperative to do this as soon as possible, as your income flow will be changing dramatically.

Taking time to undertake financial assessment includes reviewing:

- **Automatic payments:** monthly bills, expenses, mortgages, car payments, etc.
- **Lifestyle amenities:** household services, memberships, subscriptions, etc.
- **Payments to financial accounts:** 401K, IRA, ROTH or other accounts

For a template to help you organize your finances, see *Appendix A: Financial Assessment Checklist*.

In a layoff situation, unemployment insurance can provide a critical benefit for keeping a steady stream of income flowing. Unemployment programs are governed by the laws of your state and have slightly different guidelines depending on the region in which you live. Eligibility for unemployment is based on several factors including your previous salary, length of employment, amount and duration of severance (if any), among other variables.

By initiating the unemployment application process, you will receive information indicating what type of unemployment insurance you qualify for, the amount of weekly benefit, and the length for which you can request benefit dollars. With the rapid integration of technology, most unemployment applications and funding requests now can be filed online or by phone.

In addition, you may also be eligible for federal financial assistance programs such as the Dislocated Worker program, which provides support to those considered “permanently” laid off—meaning they are unlikely to return to their previous industry or occupation. Be sure to check with your local employment centers regarding your eligibility status. Re-employment counselors and other

support staff can assist you with determining the benefits available in your state and region. More benefits are covered in Chapter 13.

Within his first month of being laid off, Jason was required to attend a re-employment workshop at a local WorkForce Center. He initially thought that the session would be boring and unnecessary, but as it was a mandatory step for receiving unemployment insurance, he needed to attend.

Within the first fifteen minutes after the workshop started, however, Jason was glad that he had shown up. One of the first things he learned was the importance of managing money and how to assess his current financial situation. The workshop facilitator outlined a simple process using a spreadsheet that would help anyone to organize and prioritize his or her financial accounts and obligations. Even though Jason considered himself savvy about money matters, this simple approach to organizing his accounts made sense.

When he got home, Jason put together his own spreadsheet containing his outstanding bills, investment accounts, and other financial information. He found that having all of his financial data in one report gave him a better picture of his financial position. Not only did this provide him with a place to keep his cash flow organized, it also gave him one less thing to think about. This gave Jason the best thing of all: peace of mind.

REALITY CHECK

- Transition time is a good opportunity to organize your finances.
- Help and support are available. You don't need to figure it out on your own.
- There are financial resources and benefits for you. As a taxpayer, you have contributed to these programs!

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1) How can organizing my finances help ease my mind during my job transition?
- 2) How can being more open to help and support benefit me during this time?

INNER AFFIRMATIONS

"There is an abundance of help and support available to me at all times. I have direct financial benefits available to me, and I have only to learn how to optimize their use. I have the ability to organize and control my financial needs."

CHAPTER 4 — THE EMPTY INBOX

*The answer to every adversity lies in
courageously moving forward with faith.*

— Edward Mbiaka

When you experience a significant event in your life, your first reaction may be to tell someone. And with the advent of social networking, some people broadcast their stories like a 24-hour news channel. Individual life events are more public than ever before, and with this potentially larger exposure, the number of people who can respond to our stories is even greater.

Telling our white box stories will bring a wide variety of responses from others, most of which will be based on each individual's experience with job loss or another similar life event. Some responses will be helpful, while others may just express concern or support. Some people won't respond, perhaps because they don't know what to say or the subject may hit too close to home. Either way, it's nice to know that other people are aware of what we're going through. Expressing our feelings out loud, especially to someone else, can bring a sense of relief. There is power in proclamation.

For people who aren't familiar with the growing trends toward business restructuring, there might be an initial shame or a stigma associated with being laid off. However, today's business market is more agile and flexible than in the past. Being laid off is becoming more common, so **we don't need to be afraid to tell our stories.**

At first Kyle wasn't sure if he wanted to tell anyone besides his family that he'd been laid off. But after some thought, he realized that his friends and family have always been supportive of him no matter what the circumstance, so why should this be any different?

Kyle wasn't accustomed to asking for help, but this was one of those moments where he wanted to reach out and allow others to support him. He decided to post a note online as well as send out short emails and text messages to selected friends.

For the next two weeks, Kyle found himself wading through waves of phone calls, text messages, and emails from friends and family expressing their love and support. People he didn't even know were sending messages of hope and encouragement through social media outlets. The outpouring was amazing.

Then, exactly two weeks after the shocking event, his inbox was almost empty—hardly an email, phone call, or text message related to the layoff. It suddenly felt like the whole event had never occurred. But it had.

So what was this all about?

Even when life slams on the brakes for you, the rest of the world keeps going. Every life event has a process—a beginning and an end—and so do the people touched by it. When others near us are swept into the emotional waves of a personal life event, they, too, become a part of

it...for a short time. But then they return to their own lives. They come, they love, and they leave. And life continues.

As he thought more about it, Kyle realized that the responses from others had simply run their course. And even though he could understand the concept, he still couldn't help but think to himself, *so if other people can move on so quickly, why can't I? How come I can't just process the sadness and disappointment and get over it?*

Because it happened to me.

People who are not directly impacted by an event can process faster because **sympathy can only take us so far.**

Even when we extend support to others, we have an intrinsic need to nurture ourselves; when something happens to you, your own process will always be different from anyone else's reaction to that event. Each of us integrates life changes in our own way and in our own time. Being aware of this will help us to honor the unique process for everyone, including ourselves.

REALITY CHECK

- Nobody understands a situation like the person who is in it.
- While others may no longer react to an event the way you are reacting, they may still feel connected to you.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1) Whom have I told about my layoff or job transition?
Why some and not others?
- 2) How am I allowing others to help and support me when I need it?

INNER AFFIRMATIONS

"I know that this time of great change will bring about many new experiences, feelings, and responses from others. I also know that many of the challenges are temporary, and I am willing to be open to the support and encouragement that I will receive from others."

CHAPTER 5 — THE POWER OF GRIEVING

With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts.

— Eleanor Roosevelt

Grieving is a natural emotional process that every one of us experiences in one form or another throughout our lifetime. There are many theories about why and how we grieve, and while the process of grieving is most often associated with death, we can still feel intense distress over any kind of loss, including a job loss.

So you might tell others, “Oh it’s just a job. It’s not like somebody died.” But we know it’s more than that. For most of us, work is a significant portion of daily life, and for many, has helped them to define their purpose and direction. Losing a job is losing a connection to people, passion, and purpose. We will feel it.

Allow yourself to grieve for a while. Recognize that you will experience waves of emotions. Give yourself permission to treat a job loss like any other type of loss, because *it is* a loss. The process of grieving and acceptance is a very important and integral part of moving forward. **Grief comes in waves, but so does clarity.**

Facing and embracing grief allows us to experience the shock, anger, disappointment, and other feelings that need to be processed before we can move through this transition. We can allow things to settle down, trusting that we are exactly where we need to be at this time, in this place, going through this grieving process. Our purpose right now might be to stay in the discomfort and learn from it—we're learning patience and acceptance. Grieving is a time to talk about our feelings, not talk ourselves out of them.

Grief can stir up other emotions, many very intense, and it's okay to feel all of them. Feelings of guilt, fear, and sadness are a normal part of any grieving process. Take deep breaths and learn to be okay with sitting in the swamp for a while. Even while you are grieving, you can still be gentle and kind with yourself. Remain present and aware while you are grieving and be aware that you may be more sensitive or easily triggered as you work through your grief.

Grieving is not the time to evaluate your entire life. It's okay to leave other problems on the back burner to be solved at another time. This is your moment to be with your emotions.

The grieving phase is also an opportunity to seek wisdom from your resources: your go-to people, books, movies, music—whatever you use to reconnect with love, acceptance, friendship, wisdom, and support. Grieving is time for you to process what has happened, but you don't need to process alone.

Jill was recently laid off and was having a difficult time. In her mind, the layoff was unnecessary and impersonal, and she didn't want to accept it.

A week later, Jill received a note from a former

colleague, who was also laid off, inviting her to a get-together with their other laid-off peers. At first, Jill considered attending the event, but after giving it more thought, decided not to go. She just wanted to be alone right now. When she was ready to grieve with others, she would reach out.

Later that day, Jill had another burst of anger and frustration when she remembered that five of her customers were registered to attend one of her webinars in the coming week and she had no way of reaching them. Jill felt that her credibility was on the line, and this was disappointing and frustrating. What could she do? She had to let it go.

The following week, Jill met a close friend for coffee. Her friend listened attentively as Jill vented her frustrations. After they were done, Jill started to feel better; and by the end of the week, she began feeling even more relief. It felt like the fog was finally lifting.

That weekend, Jill thought about what her Mom had said to her the day she'd been laid off: "Just give it time." As she thought about her Mom's words, she took a series of deep breaths and focused on letting her anger go. Jill knew that with the help of her friends and family, and by giving herself more time to work through her grief, she would eventually get through this. She just needed to take it one day at a time.

REALITY CHECK

- Grieving is natural. Allow yourself to go through the process.
- Be kind and gentle with yourself as you grieve.
- Remember that this experience, too, shall pass.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1) As I've been grieving, which feelings have seemed natural? Which have surprised me?
- 2) How can I best support myself as I experience the grieving process?

INNER AFFIRMATIONS

"I am allowed to grieve about anything that has changed in my life, including this event. I realize that by processing the feelings associated with change, I can move into a healthy place within me where new creative energy and enthusiasm will start to form."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Thomas Sunnarborg is a professional speaker, best-selling author, and life transition coach. He's spent his life living and working in different parts of the world including Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. To stimulate his creative flow, Michael is also a professional photographer for which he has won several awards. In addition to his line of best-selling books, Michael's blogs and photo galleries have been followed by thousands of readers worldwide, including photos licensed and sold by National Geographic. Michael currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

For information on coaching, presentations, workshops and other books by Michael Thomas Sunnarborg, visit michaelcreative.com

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The White Box Club HANDBOOK

Simple Tools For Career Transition

The White Box Club Handbook—appropriately named after the daunting white boxes many employees receive to "pack up their things"—was written to provide hope, encouragement, and inspiration to anyone who has been laid off, is unemployed, or in a career transition. Join best-selling author, speaker, and life transition coach Michael Thomas Sunnarborg as he shares his stories, simple tools, exercises, and resources designed to help you know yourself, clarify your new direction, and begin aligning yourself to your ideal career.

"I wish I had had this book way back when I was laid off TWICE in the same year. *The White Box Club Handbook* would have guided me in much more productive directions than I took at the time."

– Elizabeth (Bette) Frick, PhD, ELS, The Text Doctor LLC

"White Box moments. Tragedy? Shame? Or simply an opportunity in disguise? This luminous book is a metaphor about life's transitions, and how to navigate the uncertainties of our 'white box' moments. It's engaging, enlightening and written from a position of hope. This is a quite remarkable book."

– Rod Johnson, President, *Growing Your Leaders*

"Michael gives you a way to structure your thoughts, time and activities when you find yourself in transition or thinking about making a career change. It is both empowering and calming at the same time."

– Mary Texer, IT Manager, *Blue Cross Blue Shield*

"Sunnarborg's work strikes a delicate balance between reflection and action—practical resources and emotional intelligence. Part therapist and part career coach, Sunnarborg's book offers readers a long-term solution to work through the career transition."

– Soma D. Jurgensen, Owner, *Intentional Growth Strategies*

"Michael's simple yet profound advice gets to the heart of the emotional struggles this kind of life event brings up for people. Having been in The White Box Club himself, he knows exactly how to help someone go from discouraged to hopeful about the future."

– Kathleen Murray, CLC, President, *KM Coaching LLC*

From the best-selling author of the balance series

