

BACK TO BUSINESS



THE VIEW
RICHARD HARRIS

A new beginning

Consider being downsized as an opportunity, never a setback – and a time to reflect on your skills and achievements and to plan the rest of your life

Hong Kong government ministers can be compared to the London buses. You wait ages for one to be dismissed for incompetence and then two come along at once.

The sudden removals of ministers Paul Tang Kwok-wai and Tsang Tak-sing came as a genuine surprise. For Chief Executive CY Leung to lose one was unfortunate – to lose two smacks of carelessness.

The ministers explained their “unforeseen family circumstances” (Tang) and that he was “glad to retire” (Tsang) – but the spin-doctors were vicious. Tsang was said not to be “proactive enough with youth work” and Tang had been “limited by his civil service way of thinking” – presumably unlike the other civil servants ministers left in government. There was no kind word of their long decades of service and unparalleled contribution to the city.

Lawmaker and media hound Regina Ip Lau Suk-yea parroted,

with characteristic grace, that both Tang and Tang and were “unfit to be ministers”, applying another boot by saying that Tsang “did not enjoy socialising”. Sadly, there is no record of what the gentlemen think of Regina Ip. But massively entertaining as this is for the rest of us, we are not here to discuss the administration’s dirty linen, as they are quite effective at doing it for themselves.

You will almost certainly fire and be fired at some time over a professional career. When I was an ambitious undergraduate, 40 years ago, to be fired meant that



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either you had been at the communion wine, or you were truly hopeless. Today it is likely to be a result of restructuring, downsizing, or most commonly a difference of personalities.

Last week our very own Martin Wheatley, former head of the Securities and Futures Commission, was axed from being head of the FCA, Britain’s super regulator. He fell out with his boss, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, for doing too good a job at fining the banks for behaving badly.

I remember arriving at my first job after business school to find the hiring manager had left. Legend had it that he used to put his feet on the desk and say a word that rhymed with “rowlocks” every time someone brought him an idea.

In post Big Bang London, high taxes meant that even those quite junior were given untaxed company cars. The 1987 crash saw a round of spectacular firings with 25-year-old hotshot traders being first for the chop.



Paul Tang (left) and Tsang Tak-sing now ‘retired’. Photos: K. Y. Cheng



They would park the Porsche on the pavement outside the glass doors of the bank, lock the car, set off the alarm and then drop the keys down the drain. Boy, did we laugh!

I had a downsizing over a difference of personalities. I was from exciting Hong Kong; my boss had spent all his life in the same city, virtually at the same desk. He thought I was a cowboy; I thought he was an old fuddy duddy (only I was right).

I was called to arrive at work at 10 the next day, so (duly warned) I phoned a lawyer friend to come to the meeting. He scowled and snarled enough

for the other side enough to cave into giving me a decent package. I walked round the corner to the Tube station and punched the air as if I had scored the winning goal in the World Cup Final. Lesson one: being sacked is an appointment, not a disappointment.

The chop can happen so quickly that you don’t have a chance to go back to your workstation. A meeting may be concluded with security giving you your jacket.

If you think downsizing could come at any time, constantly update your CV, make sure your personal contacts are up to date,

and network like mad while you are on the company’s ticket. Never ever take proprietary company information. It is dated and worthless, unless it is a current transaction, and it never ceases to amaze me why companies make a big deal over it.

Hints of things to come are the “black plastic bag” on the desks, or your swipe card not working. HR departments like to chop on a Friday, or Christmas Eve, so that your colleagues just see an empty desk when they return. The “Walk of Shame” through the office to pick up your personal things over the weekend is accompanied by a burly guard.

Regard being downsized as a celebration and an opportunity, never a setback. Look forward to it as a time to reflect on your skills and achievements and to plan the rest of your life. Life is long; enjoy it. For there is a bigger and better world out there – and a chance for you to do what you really want.

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