

How to Handle That Pink Slip

Be prepared, and don't be afraid to negotiate, says the co-author of *I Didn't See It Coming*

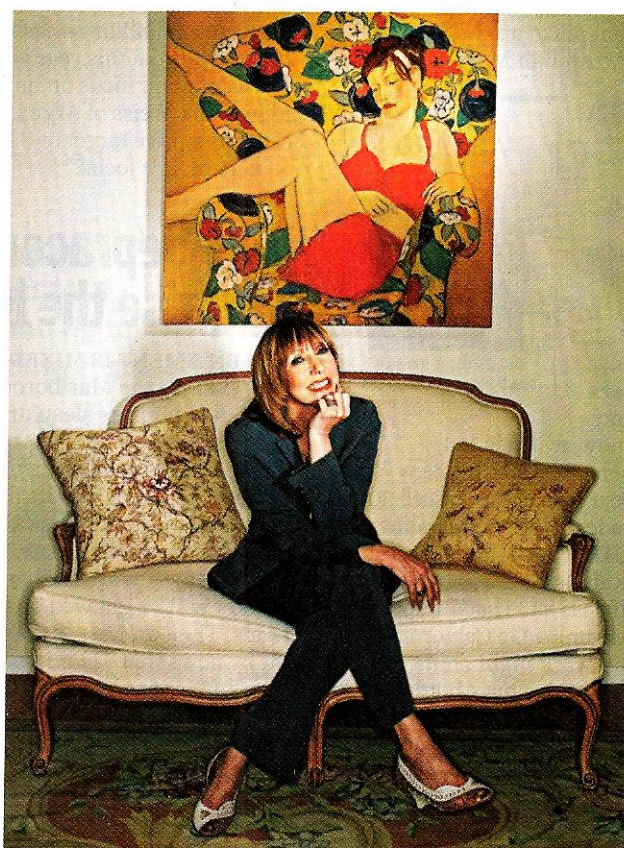
Over her two decades at ABC Television, Amy Dorn Kopelan rose through the ranks until she became vice-president for direct marketing. Then her division was shut down. ABC wanted her out in a few weeks, but Kopelan negotiated to stay a year, helping her staff find jobs and going into business for herself. Now president of New York conference management company Bedlam Entertainment and founder of COACH ME, Kopelan recently co-authored a book with Nancy C. Widmann and Elaine J. Eisenman called *I Didn't See It Coming*. She speaks with senior writer Diane Brady about strategies to protect yourself when you get a pink slip.

Why are so many people surprised when they're fired or laid off?

People don't see it coming because they love social and professional predictability. In your heart, if something were to rumble because of problems at work, you would know—but the tendency is to ignore it.

What are the common signs?

If there's a merger or acquisition, that's a sign. To expect that anything will be normal is wrong. If a new boss comes into your division, that's a big sign. A less obvious sign may be when a coach is brought in to help with some of your discussion or management issues. If you see that adversaries who don't normally



meet are meeting, that too could be a sign.

How do you prepare yourself for when you are let go?

Any time you start a new job or get a new title at work, the first thing you want to think about is "What is my exit strategy?" Always have some money tucked aside in an exit fund. The goal is, if possible, to cover a year's worth of expenses.

You have to think about your marketability. What are you doing to be your

own best press agent? Another thing is to be constantly networking—inside and outside your company, as well as inside and outside your industry. You should have your own personal board of directors. They don't have to meet, but those are people you can go to for advice.

When you're fired, should you leave on the spot?

If somebody grabs you under the arm and escorts you from the building, wrestling them to the floor probably isn't a good idea. But it doesn't mean you have to leave and never come back. There is usually an opportunity the very next day to have a meeting to review what you have accomplished and to ask to renegotiate the standard severance policy. You never have to sign anything or take the package that's offered. It gives you a sense of control. I don't know anybody who has accepted the first offer on a severance policy.

What if you're let go and told to be out in two weeks?

Now you can say I'm not ready to leave. You can say I don't want to go until all the pieces are in place. Is the package one I like? Should I come back as a consultant? Should the company become my client if I decide to go on my own?

You have a lot of negotiating power at that point. The company can always do better. They don't want gossip, innuendo, or lower productivity if your deal isn't consummated quickly.

People don't like to admit they were fired. Can you reframe the reasons for your exit for your new workplace?

It comes back to what happened when you left. You should insist on controlling how your departure is framed. You should also insist that you are the one to address your staff and your colleagues before anyone else. You can say that you're leaving to explore other opportunities,

for example, and there need not be more explanation. If you control the official explanation for your exit, then wherever else you go, it's not an issue. You can walk into any new role and everything has already been laid out in such a cordial and professional way that there's no story you have to fabricate. ■

KOPELAN
Ask yourself:
"What is my exit strategy?"