

*Half of my life is gone, and I have let
The years slip from me and have not fulfilled
The aspirations of my youth, to build
Some tower of song with lofty parapet...
Though halfway up the hill, I see the Past
Lying beneath me with its sounds and sights,
A city in the twilight dim and vast,
With smoking roofs, soft hills, and gleaming lights
And hear above me on the autumnal blast
The cataract of Death far thundering from the
heights*

From *Mezzo Cammin*
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The Organization's Role in Managing Midlife Crisis

Accommodating the midlife employee not only prevents problems, but capitalizes on a store of valuable potential that is lost to most organizations.

By PHILIP I. MORGAN, JOHN PATTON and H. KENT BAKER

Many people experience crisis during the middle years of their adult lives. This phenomenon, commonly called midlife crisis, often involves time of personal upheaval, soul searching and possibly redirection that affects the individual, family, friends and the organization in which the person works.

From an organizational perspective, midlife crisis is particularly significant for several reasons. It often occurs when people are at the height of their careers and thus highly valued by the organization in terms of experience, productivity and expertise. The disruption attendant to midlife changes may be reflected in changing attitudes toward work and in declining performance. The problem intensifies when managers experience midlife crisis

at the same time they are coping with it among their subordinates.

How can organizations cope with the unique developmental and career needs of the middle aged? What is the meaning of midlife crisis? What causes it? What are the symptoms? And most important, what can organizations do to minimize the stress of this period and to capitalize on the abilities of the middle aged?

Life stages

Gail Sheehy, in her best-selling book *Passages*, points out that just as children pass through developmental stages, so do adults. The adult stages are subtle and difficult to recognize, but they are real. Midlife is viewed as a time when individuals face changes in both their family and career lives. Erik Erickson suggests that each life stage involves unique developmental tasks that must be mastered in order to advance to the next stage, and characterizes the midlife period as a choice between integration and despair.

The midlife experience varies, depending on personality, circumstances and other situational variables. An individual's reaction may be one of personal upheaval, soul searching and depression. For others, midlife is a period of integration in which a smooth

transition to adult maturity is experienced. More typical is denying the experience. When denial becomes a way of life, repressed anxiety is expressed in unhealthy ways such as attempting to avoid the pressures that midlife creates.

Responses to midlife crisis

Regardless of age or motivation, midlife brings on pressure to reevaluate and redefine goals, relationships and life. According to Nancy Mayer, family, work and physical self normally demand reevaluation. A now-or-never attitude may develop as a person sees opportunities to fulfill secret dreams slipping away. Leslie Westoff notes that the middle aged may lunge out blindly to make their dreams come true by radically changing careers or altering the focus of their work and life.

Joe Thomas places the responses to mid-career crisis in four categories: misers, marginals, movers and motivators. Each has consequences for the individual and the organization.

The misers are apt to exist from day to day, leading superficial and unrewarding lives with little growth. As their performance declines, their response to midlife crisis becomes detrimental to the organization and to themselves.

The marginals typically remain with the

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organization and perform satisfactorily but may hurt the organization by trying to prove they are superior to their younger and perhaps more technically qualified subordinates.

The movers do not feel satisfied with their lives or jobs and make little effort to be productive. Some look for careers elsewhere to meet their needs. Others remain on the job but change their attitude and begin to complain about things that were not bothersome in the past. If the person leaves the job, the organization may lose an individual with considerable knowledge and experience. If the person remains, a morale problem may develop because others may see this individual as retired on the job.

Midlife should not be viewed pessimistically. Motivators respond to midlife by gaining a better self understanding and a more realistic, self-actualized outlook. They adjust to midlife changes, remain a valuable organizational asset and may serve as excellent models or mentors to younger employees.

Causes of midlife crisis

Various reasons trigger this self-assessment. Culture may trigger reassessment. In our youth-oriented society, the middle aged lack a strong public image, except the unflattering ones depicted by mass media. Aggressive and energetic youth with recent technical training can cause the middle aged to feel threatened or obsolete. Maintaining a standard of living while paying childrens' college tuition and supporting aging parents add to the stress of this period. Other psychological stresses such as children leaving home, parents dying, divorce, the loss of youthful fantasies and confrontation with mortality also weigh heavily on the middle aged.

Ironically, the crisis often occurs when a person has reached the peak of effectiveness and productivity on the job. Finding a wide disparity between expected and realized goal achievement may be frustrating and lead to a sense of loneliness because failed expectations are difficult to share.

Women and midlife crisis

Although women experience midlife crisis at approximately the same age as men, their experience is unique. The "empty nest syndrome" is no longer the depressing loss it once was for women. Women are now free to explore facets of life that had been postponed or denied to them while raising a family.

Unlike men in this age group, women who have been homemakers seek competition, external stimulation and the rewards of working outside the home. They frequently become ambitious and outgoing at about the same time their husbands and men their age are looking inward and seeking less pressure. This presents an ideal opportunity for forward-looking organizations. Middle-aged women may be a good source of stable, energetic and mature managers because they have the personal sensitivity necessary for solving the human relations problems of the younger generation.

What can be done?

Numerous interventions exist for minimizing difficulties during the midlife transition stage, but most organizations fail to realize the disruptive impact that midlife crisis can have on established work patterns until it is too late. If organizations expect well adjusted, satisfied and productive employees during the midlife period, then they should assume a helping posture. This requires accepting the reality that midlife change is something quite normal.

Organizations should begin by instituting an awareness program among managers. This includes becoming aware of the early warning signs of midlife crisis and of the options available for dealing with the situation. Complaining about things that were not bothersome in the past, growing dissatisfaction with a job and with oneself are potential signs to which managers should be attuned.

Providing information and counseling for employees prior to midlife change is an important second step. Organizations long have realized the importance of preventative maintenance with their physical assets. This concept also applies to human assets. If organizations anticipate and remove disruptive aspects of midlife crisis, as pre-retirement programs help people plan and adjust to retirement, then both the individual and the organization benefit.

In addition to helping employees prepare for the midlife transition stage before it occurs, organizations may take other actions during the stage.

■ *Provide continuing education.* One of the reasons that some people feel threatened or even incompetent during midlife is that they must compete with younger, better educated and more technically qualified employees. By allowing their skills to become obsolete, the middle aged have become dinosaurs

in an ever-changing world.

A lack of relevant job-related skills may be addressed through continuing education programs. Organizations have many options available to them. For example, companies may give employees the opportunity to attend workshops and seminars away from work or provide similar training in-house. Tuition reimbursement plans are particularly attractive if nearby educational institutions offer appropriate coursework. Thus, organizations should view their employees as human resources requiring regular enrichment, renewal and modification.

Goals involving skills and work-related aspirations may be built into performance evaluation systems. That is, at the beginning of the evaluation period, the manager and subordinate agree to mutually acceptable goals involving the employee's training or development. The employee has an incentive to grow and the manager has an obligation to help the employee achieve these goals.

■ *Provide opportunities for retraining.* Changing jobs or careers is one way people obtain psychic rewards. Peter Drucker notes that people remain in the same job until they become bored. They are not burnt out, but simply need to be put into a different environment, meeting different challenges. In some cases a lateral transfer is appropriate, while in others, tailoring a job to meet an individual's needs is required. Providing the opportunity for a second career or a different job fulfills the need for a new environment with new associates and challenges.

Organizations should also allow employees to reduce their responsibility and pay voluntarily, provided the stigma attached to such a change is removed. Some people would like a job with less stress and responsibility, but fail to seek reassignment because a reduction in the job's difficulty or responsibility may signal that the change was either punitive or the individual's fault.

There are, of course, limitations on how far a company should go. Retraining and job transfers are not cost-free activities. In conducting a cost-benefit analysis to determine the tradeoffs, both direct and indirect costs should be examined. Direct costs involve expenditures closely related to the training activity, such as the cost of instruction, materials or travel. Indirect costs are more difficult to determine and are often higher than direct costs. Indirect

costs include the compensation paid to employees while they are in class and the cost of output foregone. Organizations should balance these costs against the expected short- and long-term benefits such as increased motivation and performance, lower turnover and recruitment costs, and improved versatility of the work force.

Retraining and job transfer should be viewed on an individual basis. It may be better to provide retraining or transfer than to lose an experienced and valued employee. On the other hand, it may actually be cheaper and better for morale to help an employee find a job or start another career outside the company than to continue to pay the salary of a person who really wants to leave. Under such circumstances, outplacement services benefit the individual and the organization.

■ *Develop a mentoring program.* Maturing individuals have a reservoir of experience that often goes untapped. Some feel a need to serve as a mentor or to train others. The expertise and experience of midlifers can be tapped by having them serve in general management positions or as trainers. In order to assume these

independence. During midlife, the needs of individuals may change. Some common needs of midlifers, especially men, involve the need to have more autonomy and independence and the desire to pursue personal growth goals. Organizations should attempt to meet these needs in order to retain competent employees.

Alternative work schedules such as flextime and job sharing allow people to have more control over their working hours. In job sharing, the responsibilities of a job can be shared by two or more people, giving both people greater freedom to pursue other activities. A third option, redesigning jobs, is important not only for middle management positions but also for professional and technical jobs. Emphasis should be placed on the more challenging aspects of the job such as planning and coordinating functions with less demanding tasks delegated to lower levels. A final option is for employers to make part-time work more attractive by prorating the benefits in proportion to full-time work. Thus, employees can enjoy greater autonomy and independence to pursue activities of their choice while having many of the

organization is another option.

■ *Provide professional counseling.* Since many organizations fail to acknowledge the midlife syndrome, it is not surprising that facilities with professional counselors are rare. The lack of professional counselors may also be a function of the organization's size and attitude toward its role in helping employees. Small organizations are less likely to have professional counselors than large ones. Also, some types of counseling may be viewed as outside of an organization's responsibility. A person needing a psychiatrist usually must look outside of the organization.

At one end of the spectrum are organizations that provide no formal professional counseling but serve as a referral service. On the other end are organizations that have a full range of services. In the middle are those with a limited array of counseling services, such as career counseling.

The cost of providing professional counseling delivery systems varies widely. The cost of having full-time professionals on staff is prohibitive except for larger organizations. However, even smaller firms can help employees gain access to counselors by establishing benefits that provide financial assistance for certain types of counseling. By either providing directly or helping employees gain access to these services, a valued employee's experience and ability may be retained by the organization.

■ *Sabbaticals for selected employees.* Although usually limited to top management echelons, some organizations offer opportunities for travel, study or work with another organization. Organizations in the public and private sectors lend specialists to local educational institutions. Sometimes these loans may serve as transitional assignments for senior executives seeking a second career in academia. Sabbaticals are also granted for the purpose of obtaining advanced degrees.

Sabbaticals are a controversial alternative. On the positive side, sabbaticals may serve as a means of avoiding burn out and allowing people to enjoy new experiences. When these individuals return to work, they are usually rejuvenated and inspired. They may also acquire new knowledge and insight valuable to their organization.

On the negative side, organizations have to fill the individual's position temporarily and determine what to do with the replacement when the incum-

Sabbaticals are a controversial alternative that can result in rejuvenated, inspired employees

positions, they will have to be trained, which in turn provides an opportunity for growth and development.

One issue surrounding mentoring programs involves how mentors should be selected. Should they be people who have excelled in their jobs or simply those who have an interest in sharing their experience and knowledge with others? A second issue concerns the degree of formality of the program. Existing supervisors or managers may serve as informal mentors to their subordinates. Yet, there can also be formal mentors serving in a training capacity for a specific time period who then return to their former jobs. A final issue involves compensation. For instance, assume that a highly paid sales manager desires a temporary change as a sales trainer with a lower compensation level. How should the person be compensated if assigned to the new position temporarily?

■ *Provide more autonomy and*

benefits of full-time employment.

■ *Provide support groups.* Because midlife crisis can alienate, some people feel isolated and alone. Establishing consciousness raising groups comprised of individuals with similar situations affords the opportunity to share experiences and may have great therapeutic value.

Support groups may take many forms. Formal support groups that meet periodically to discuss issues relating to midlife changes could be conducted by either trained counselors or individuals who have adjusted well to midlife changes. Another approach is to provide an "information hotline" that would enable employees to discuss problems or receive information on how to obtain assistance with job or career opportunities. Establishing informal peer counseling programs in which people needing assistance coping with midlife changes consult with another individual within the

bent returns from sabbatical. Another issue involves the rights of the individual on sabbatical. Does the individual have the right to the same job when he or she returns? Does the person receive compensation or accrue benefits while on sabbatical? Does the organization have a recourse if the individual decides not to return? Sabbaticals are one of the organizational options available for dealing with midlife changes. They are not without problems and should be used sparingly.

Recognizing and understanding the experiences of the midlife work force is essential if organizations are to draw the fullest potential from human assets. Offering viable paths toward career changes and other options for midlife employees not only enables the organization to benefit from additional potential and value, but might be the pivotal difference whether an employee makes a successful transition or burns out. Establishing systems that accommodate midlife employees doesn't need to be difficult, and can result in a healthier organization comprised of healthier individuals.

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