Managing Adult

By Alice G. Sargent and Nancy K. Schlossberg

To see the discomfort confronting some of today's managers, we need only watch Douglas Brackman on *L.A. Law* as he conducts a staff meeting. Two of his partners are thinking about getting married and storm out of meetings when they disagree. One attorney is having an affair with a client; another is engaged in a child custody fight with her husband, who has kidnaped their son; another can't decide whether to remain with the firm; and another is having problems with his woman friend, and the problems interfere with his work. One of the secretaries is frustrated because she feels she receives little recognition, and another is in love with her boss. Brackman, like many managers, is uncomfortable with and overwhelmed by that interpersonal underworld; he did not expect to deal with such issues when he became an attorney.

Though those problems are exaggerated for dramatic effect, they are common issues for today's managers. For many, being a manager is a second career. Upon promotion into management, the well-intentioned, technically trained, competent problem-solver suddenly confronts a myriad of people issues. And more issues arise every day. The managers of today have employees who refuse to move, become pregnant, adopt children, get married, get divorced, care for sick parents, are single parents, want time to participate in fitness programs, or must plan a friend's funeral. In short, the new manager must understand employees as people, as adults.

Of course, managers know something about adults; they are adults themselves. Yet much of what they know reflects their particular experience and their own assumptions about the ways adults develop and cope with change. To help managers become more effective and imaginative, we suggest three basic truths about adult behavior:

- Adult behavior is determined by transitions, not age.
- Adults are motivated to learn and to change by their continual need to belong, matter, control, master, renew, and take stock.
- Adult readiness for change depends on four *S*'s—situation, support, self, and strategies.

As a manager, you need to know that people in transition are often preoccupied and a little confused

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Transition, not age

A unique aspect of the adult experience is that it is controlled by social clocks. We make assumptions about what is appropriate for adults to do at certain ages. We make those assumptions, however, as if adult behavior were biologically determined, as behavior is in infancy and adolescence. For example, many still believe that the capacity to learn diminishes with age. In truth, while we do change biologically, our general performance does not necessarily suffer. We start losing brain cells when we are born, but we have so many surplus cells that the losses mean nothing. Indeed, researchers have pointed to the amazing "plasticity" of intellectual performance through an adult's life. Why then, you might ask, do we stop promoting men and women around the age of 40? Why do certain firms still have agreements that senior partners must leave by age 62? Of course, some people at 62 should have retired at 32—not everyone is born with unlimited intellectual capacity—but many are still vigorous and raring to go when the company thinks it's time for them to retire. Why then do people hesitate to hire new employees who are in their forties or fifties?

Most of us continue to attribute adult behavior and capacity to learn to the strict rules of biology and chronology. We say about ourselves and others, "I am too old to do this or that," or, "It's time to move over for someone else." It might well be time, but not because of biology. Bernice Neugarten, a guru of adult development, reminds us that chronological age is an unreliable predictor of how people will behave.

If chronological age is not the indicator of what is going on inside an adult, what is? We contend that to understand adults, you need to know about their transitions. Transitions are the events (like retirement) or non-events (like being passed over for a promotion) that alter adult lives. The more the event or non-event alters an adult's roles, routines, assumptions, and relationships, the more he or she will be affected by the transition. For example, if you are in a room with 40-year-old technicians, what do you know about them, other than the fact that they are

Transitions

40 years old? To understand each individual, you need to know whether he or she has been fired, is falling in love, is returning to school for an MBA, has aging parents who need care, or has just become a single parent. You need to understand the changes in the person's life and their impact on his or her work before you can understand the technician.

As a manager, you need to know that people in transition are often preoccupied and a little confused, even if the transition is a desired one. For example, a promotion to a first supervisory job can be exciting, yet the new supervisor—whose roles, relationships, assumptions, and routines have been altered—will be disoriented while he or she figures out what is expected in the new role. In addition, the isolation from friends who were colleagues and who are now subordinates can be upsetting.

The message is this: if you intend to make assumptions about employees, then you need to know more about them than their ages. You must listen carefully to hear whether they have just started transitions, are thinking of making changes, feel satisfied with the events and non-events of their lives, feel stuck, or feel fulfilled. Literally, you must find out where they are coming from.

Motivation to learn and change

Although many excellent researchers of the adult experience try to demonstrate that adults experience different transitions depending on their ages, we have found that many, if not most, transitions are not related to age. Our studies show that people face transitions throughout their lives, and with each transition—whether good or bad, anticipated or unanticipated—they become introspective and "take stock." They ask themselves continually, Who am I? Do I belong? Do I matter? Am I in control of my life? Can I master new tasks? Am I connected or isolated from others? Am I burned out? How can I renew my energies? They are recurrent themes, and they help adults (and managers) understand their own lives and the lives of others. They are the themes that trigger adults to learn and grow.

Belonging and mattering. A sense of belonging is that calm and positive feeling you have when you feel part of things, when you know the ropes and what is expected of you.

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The opposite of belonging—being on the outside—is what many adults feel when they make transitions. When adults start new jobs, for example, they find themselves suspended awkwardly between their old role and the new one. During that period, they need special help, such as new-employee orientation and the rapid development of support systems. Often, it's a question of little things. Take the example of the new executive who was unaware of the ritual for executives to meet in front of the elevator at noon and walk to a nearby cafeteria. No one oriented her to the office's informal norms, and she felt she was on the outside looking in. If an employee has just been promoted or hired, transition assistance will help him or her hit the ground running. It's worth it to the organization, because the smooth transition will help maintain productivity.

Related to belonging is one's need to feel that one matters—that one is the object of another person's interest and dependence, that one will be noticed when there and missed when gone. Often work situations leave people feeling isolated and alienated. The dilemma in American organizations is that we value autonomy and individualism, yet we are moving into an era of fostering team effectiveness. How does an employee blend autonomy and relatedness without too much conformity or too much isolation? Positive reinforcement is an important tool for the manager.

Controlling and mastering. Increased productivity in many industries is attributable to employees' involvement in the nature of their tasks and work strategies. Whether we are looking at the General Motors NUMI plant in California or the Ford plant in Ohio or Nordstrom department stores, the message is clear: employees perform well when they are involved, when they feel they have influence, and when they feel that they matter.

The need for control relates to the need to feel competent and to master new situations and new tasks. People in the process of transition often are preoccupied with feelings of inadequacy and incompetence, and wish to enfranchise themselves as competent, autonomous people. The drive for competence is lifelong: the new person on the job feels incompetent, as do the person taking up physical fitness for the first time, the newly single parent, and the recently transferred manager.

The move from incompetence to competence can be tortuous. Yet if the adult realizes that each transition will heighten feelings of incompetence and

that this is a normal occurrence, he or she might find confidence by saying, "This is how I would feel in any new situation." Managers can help by acknowledging the rough transition rather than denying it, and by offering support and specific strategies to learn new competencies.

Renewing. The number of books on burnout and work addiction reflects the common feeling in adults that they are stagnating. Many factors may contribute to this feeling: being passed over for a job promotion, performing a boring, repetitive job, having no new and exciting opportunities. Bardwick, in the book *Plateauing* (AMACOM, 1986), labels these factors as

- *structural plateauing*—in which the adult makes little or no movement in the organizational hierarchy;
- *content plateauing*—in which his or her work is not sufficiently stimulating;
- *lifestyle plateauing*—in which his or her personal relationships are unfulfilled.

At some point, perhaps during a transition, all adults need networking assistance or renewal from burnout. Managers can help create new opportunities for a plateaued employee by identifying the cause of the stagnation. If the cause is related to work content, for example, managers can help employees network or find a mentor, a new project, or a new learning activity.

The four *S*'s

Studies of transition—whether of losing a job, moving geographically, returning to school, caring for aging parents, or retiring early—demonstrate that people bring a combination of assets and deficits to each transition. The process of identifying those resources and lacks will do two things: first, the person will see whether he or she has enough resources to get through a particular transition successfully; and second, he or she will discover how to strengthen the areas of weakness.

The basic idea of this systematic process of mastering change includes taking stock and taking charge. The idea is simple. To cope well with a transition, the manager needs to address the four *S*'s, the first three of which help adults to take stock.

- **Situation.** What kind of transition is it? Does the person see the transition as positive, negative, expected, unexpected, desired or dreaded? Did the transition come at the worst or best possible time? Is it "on time" or "off schedule"? Is it voluntary or imposed? Is the person at the beginning, middle, or end of the transition?
- **Self.** What kinds of strengths and weaknesses does the individual bring to the situation? What is the person's previous experience in making a similar transition? Does he or she believe there are options? Is he or she basically optimistic and able to deal with ambiguity?

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In a December 1987 article by J. Fischman in *Psychology Today*, a study of Illinois Bell Telephone Company revealed that managers who remain healthy despite stressful work situations are those who are deemed "hardy"—confident, committed, and in control. Indeed, some researchers claim, according to the article, that managers can be trained to become hardy.

- **Supports.** They are the people who are likely to help—or hinder—the person getting through the transition. Does the person have support from family, friends, co-workers, and supervisors? In what ways do those people give support? In what ways do they hinder the person's efforts to change?

Once the individual has taken stock, the next step is to take charge.

- **Strategies for coping.** This is the plan of action for boosting net strengths and skills to cope with the particular transition. Does the person use several coping strategies or just one? Can the person creatively cope by changing the situation (by means of negotiation or assertiveness), changing the meaning of the situation (by means of reappraisal or shifting the blame from self), or managing reactions to stress (by means of jogging or meditating)?

According to the study of Illinois Bell Telephone Company mentioned above, the company trained managers to engage in "situational reconstruction (seeing the situation in a new way), focusing (becoming aware of where one is stuck), and improving oneself in another area from the one that is creating the problem."

Increasing managerial effectiveness

Many American organizations operate on a separatist basis, where it is assumed that personal life will not conflict with work life. We believe that we no longer can go down that road. The overlap between personal and work lives is too obvious, and the health and productivity costs of designing organizations without concern for caring or trust have been too great.

Today's managers must become aware of employees as people. Implicit in our discussion of transitions is a model for an effective manager. The model possesses certain essential competencies beyond basic technical and problem-solving skills. We see the effective manager as being self-aware, empathic, interpersonally competent, a good team leader and member, innovative, and having the skills of leadership that involve a range of styles of influence. The manager needs to be versatile and possess a blend of the best of both "masculine" and "feminine" behaviors—competence and compassion, instrumental and expressive behaviors, introspection and action, directive and supportive behaviors, autonomy and intimacy.

Management as a second career is serious business. The manager is a gardener tilling the soil in which people grow and develop. The manager is an orchestra leader coaxing excellence and building a harmonious team. Above all the manager is a role model and developer of people. No longer does the parental expression "don't do as I do, do as I say" apply. Employees will imitate the behaviors of their managers if they trust them.

The manager is also a theoretician and practitioner of adult development who must translate the theories of transitions, trust, mattering, plateauing, support, and the other themes we have discussed into policies and practices in the workplace. The manager's skills and his or her abilities to listen, to be empathic, to give feedback, to resolve conflict, and to build trust all affect the climate of the workplace.