

Career Planning

Patterns and Turning Points in Executive Growth

John G. Quay

Basic responsibility for development lies with the individual. This theme runs through countless articles, books and policy statements on the subject of management development. Whether the content of training involves knowledge or skills; whether the technique is T-Group, Kepner-Tregoe decision-making, Management Grid, or case studies—the basic motivation for learning, for growth, for change must come from within each person.

Yet, most attempts to train and develop people, especially managers, begin with the job, not the individual.

“Things are too loose around here. Let’s have a course in cost control.”

“Finance for non-financial executives—that’s what my sales managers need.”

“Harry, we consider you a real comer. We’ve decided to send you to

Harvard’s Advanced Management Program.”

Such approaches to training and development are all too common. Each of the above examples may indeed be just what the individuals wanted, but this is not the point. The point is where you start—with the job requirements or with the individuals’ needs and desires. (Or, worse yet, with what’s popular this year!)

The Career Planning Process

Career Planning is one approach which attempts to begin with the individual’s motivation rather than the immediate demands of the job. Basically, it is a patterned interview which assists each individual to think through his career goals in the light of his education, experience, interests and best abilities. It concludes with the following questions for discussion:

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"Do you have a long range career goal, or do you prefer to take life a step at a time?"

"What can the company do for you to make your job easier, better or more productive?"

"What, if anything, can the company do to assist you toward your career goal?"

The answers are reviewed one step up the management ladder in each case, and a specific development plan is designed for the subordinate. From information brought to light in this type of interview it is relatively easy to complete development plans keyed to the expressed needs and career goals of each individual.

Carrying the interview one step farther, it is also possible to develop succession plans for the unit, department or company by asking each executive to identify one or more back-ups to himself with the company. Where none exist, this is noted. The names of possible back-ups are also cleared one step up, since the executive's superior is the one who would have to make the decision on a replacement.

During Round One of career planning the use of a consultant or staff type is most effective. Here the chief qualifications are extensive executive interviewing experience and a wide knowledge of various training and development programs available on the market or which can be designed in-house. Depending on the skill of the interviewer, additional benefits may include on-the-spot counselling or feedback during the interview, suggestions as to self-development, and some assessment of personality traits, motivation and intellectual functioning. These last items are most useful in discussing promotable prospects with the superior.

Round Two—usually a year later—involves training of managers to han-

dle career planning discussions with their subordinates. Since most managers already know much of the material covered by the consultant this process is much simplified. It is also easier because, having been through it a year before, both parties have a pretty good idea of what is expected.

The training provided is short and simple. Some theoretical background on motivation, one or two role playing demonstrations, and some discussion is all that is necessary. The two "caveats" are: (1) don't promise a promotion, and (2) don't tell the subordinate he is at ceiling. If the subordinate says, "I want to be President," one can respond by "un-huh." (This simply acknowledges—"I hear what you say"—without agreeing or disagreeing.) If the man in question is in his 50's, four layers down, and lacking both education and experience for the job, there is ample opportunity to counsel on more realistic aspirations after the interview. However, most people are reasonably realistic—some even overly modest—in their self-perceptions and career hopes.

Some Common Career Types

While each career pattern is unique, some general typology is possible. Here are six of the most common career categories.

I. At Ceiling

It is surprising how many people consider themselves to be at ceiling. Because our culture places such emphasis on ambition, success and money, some may not openly admit it, but most will convey the message directly. "I'm very happy right where I am," is a very common response. "If the company expands, I think I can grow in my present job." "At my age it is unrealistic to look for much more." "My boss's job really requires an En-

gineering Degree." These are typical and often realistic replies to questions concerning career goals. Those with "depression syndrome" are frequently found in the at ceiling group. The chief characteristic of these people, other than appropriate age, is their basic job insecurity: "I'm lucky to be as far along in my career as I am, let alone hope for more."

Except in unusual circumstances, it is best not to push such individuals to reconsider their analysis of the situation. There are too many sad cases of over-promotion. Instead, it is useful to explore ways in which the individual's present position can be made easier, or more productive.

II. Career Drift

The signs of career drift appear early in any chronology of an executive: switching majors several times in college because he didn't like what he was studying; accepting a job offer purely because it was the highest one received; switching from industry to his own business then back to industry. Often there is some dabbling in night school in an attempt to find some career base, but again the effort is not sustained and the individual drifts from subject to subject rather than focusing his talents in some direction. Many such executives reach 40 or 50 years of age before "finding themselves"—sometimes in a rather dramatic way. A few go all the way to retirement without any sense of real commitment or responsibility toward their work.

For the older worker, the obvious solution to career drift is to try adjusting to his present job. If this doesn't take, professional help is probably needed.

III. Early Burn-out

Early burn-out can result from hav-

ing too much too soon. An individual may flower so fully in early life there seems little more he can hope for. When star athlete, Hobe Baker, graduated from Princeton he reflected, "I realize my life is finished. I will never equal the excitement of playing on the football fields." He felt there was no place to go but down.

More often early burn-out occurs when youngsters are guided into inappropriate careers by well meaning but insensitive parents or advisors. If basic intelligence is present, these young men move up rapidly through three or four promotions. Then they just seem to peter out. They are frequently confused by their own lack of sustained drive. Staying interested in work requires real effort. In the end their best energies go toward hobbies, sports, and outside activities.

Regardless of the reasons, the early burn-out, like the career drifter, needs to find some correlation between his work and his best talents and abilities. Again, this may require professional counselling.

IV. Over His Head

Over-promotion is a frequent cause of trouble. This can be true at any level up to and including the company president. (The presidency of any large organization requires more than any one man's capacities, and many chief executives realize they need one or more alter egos to make up for their own shortcomings.) But most cases of over-promotion occur in middle or lower management.

The symptoms are easy to identify—busyness, insecurity, constant resistance to change, indecision and such physical ailments as ulcers. While easy to identify, this problem is hard to solve since most individuals find a downward adjustment is simply too much for their pride to take. It may be

easier to fire an individual than to demote him. At least when he is fired he can rationalize the action, e.g., "the company is too stupid to appreciate my talents." Such an individual is most likely to try to find another job at the same or higher level, and since the selection process is still more intuitive than scientific, he may land a job which is even more over his head. References, in an effort to be kind, perpetuate the problem and in the long run do a disservice to the individual they are trying to help.

The best solution is usually to shift the individual sideways to some restricted segment of the job which he can handle. However, all too often over-promoted executives are kicked upstairs or are transferred to corporate staff—sometimes accompanied by a raise in pay!

V. Slow and Steady

This is, in many respects, the ideal executive. He learns and mellows at his own pace, and progresses, rung by rung, up the ladder. The result is a mature "well done" manager—and this defines competence. The shop superintendent who knows his people, machines and operation like the back of his hand is typical. Most successful businesses have slow and steady types in ample supply.

The problem of the slow and steady career pattern is time. In a large organization there is simply not time enough for an individual to go step by step through all the phases of the business on his way to the top, and still learn each phase thoroughly. Therefore, the slow and steady types are frequently found in the lower and middle echelons of management. They are often happy and mature citizens, comfortable in their competence, and the envy of their more harried brothers who may have climbed higher up

the executive ladder.

VI. Hotshot

The hotshot career pattern is easily identifiable by the simple equation of high position and early age. The twenty-nine year old who makes vice president and the Young Presidents' Club members fall into this category.

The hotshots are becoming more numerous for several reasons. First, there seems to be a growing passion for youth in America today. It has become fashionable to promote very young executives to top positions, just as it was chic to have a British secretary some years ago. But frequently, hidden behind such youngsters, there is a seasoned old hand who still runs the business and calls the shots on significant decisions.

The second reason young people are emerging in higher positions is the increasing rate of change, both technological and social, and the need for new ideas and innovation to stay competitive. Related to the need for innovation is today's heavy emphasis on engineering and science. Company, university, and government research and engineering centers are on the lookout for creative young people, who's best work is often done before they reach the age of thirty. In order to retain these brilliant and creative types, many companies move them rapidly into senior positions.

The last reason for the emergence of youth at the top is the size and complexity of today's giant organizations. A man *must* move rapidly to become president by the time he is in his early fifties. Even in one function, like manufacturing or finance, there are often eight or more layers from junior engineer or accountant to the vice president level. Ideally, for general management, it is most helpful if an executive has been through two

or more functions on his way up, and this means a minimum of ten or a dozen moves before the presidency—and thirty years in which to make them. On an average, this is one promotion or move every three years or less. While this rate is entirely appropriate at the bottom rungs—a bright individual can master a job at this level in a year or two—the problem arises at the senior levels. Here the projects are long range, complex, and require more wisdom, patience and judgment. For developing these traits there is no substitute for time. The limits of human finitude mean that time spent learning “A,” is time *not* spent learning “B,” “C,” “D,” etc. Even when the learning time may be shortened through new techniques such as programmed instruction, and some complexities are reduced by the use of computers, the amount we should know always seems to move ahead of us more rapidly. (Parenthetically, the limits on the speed of change in our society are not technological invention or scientific break-throughs, but rather the human capacity for adjustment, adaptation and learning. Even at the physiological level, we are exceeding some of these limits, as demonstrated by nervous breakdowns, psychosomatic disorders, and the subtle anxieties that prevade our lives. We are already deprived of our basic needs for calm, pleasure, relaxation, and deep relationships.)

While there may be good reasons for hotshots at the top of the organization, there is all the more reason for the concept of the two or three man team at the top to cover adequately the variety of competencies required.

Turning Points in Career Development

Career planning requires not only the ability to identify and deal with

career types, but also an understanding of the significant turning points in career development.

Childhood

The first clues to appropriate career determination emerge during childhood. It is in these pre-analytical years that spontaneous interests and aptitudes first emerge. To recognize that a child is a reader, a thinker, an artist, an extrovert, a creative type, “thin-skinned,” or one you have to hit over the head to impress is to recognize a valuable guide line to career aptitude. The sensitive parent should recognize the general areas where a child’s natural talents fit and, equally valuable, do not fit. The stifling of a natural bent at this age may do irreparable harm.

Field of Study

A second turning point in career development is the selection of a major field of study in school, whether high school or college. Here parents, school advisors, aptitude tests and the student’s own judgment can be coordinated to arrive at a sound choice. If a clear preference has not emerged, it is possible to defer specialization by majoring in general fields. Many engineering executives today advise the college student to get as broad and liberal an education as possible, leaving to graduate school the specialized study of engineering or science. In any case, a wrong decision regarding a school major can be reversed if caught in time.

First Job

The third career turning point lies in the selection of one’s first job. Some jump for the highest offer, some want the further preparation of company training programs, while others want to get started on a real job. Guidance

by a good Placement Office at the school or college can save months if not years in the wrong company or job.

Two significant aspects of one's career emerge after this point. (1) The field narrows. It gets tougher and tougher each year to jump from accounting into, say, sales or advertising. One gets gradually set in a profession or career field from which it is increasingly difficult to move, except out at the top. (2) One's work habits, already developed in school and part time jobs, begin to harden into fixed patterns for life.

During this crucial stage wise companies can be of immense help in the young person's career development. They can provide early and frequent appraisal of progress, aptitude and talent, coupled with functional rotation which exposes the individual to several fields of work. A fair but firm boss can "shape up" any sloppy work habits by setting high standards, requiring thoroughness and attention to detail, and demanding the best the subordinate has in him.

Promotions and Changes

The fourth stage of career development occurs when promotions or job changes offer new challenges and opportunities. Most significant are the reasons for the change and the individual's perception of himself as these changes occur. Was he fired? Did he get bored and quit? Was it a fight with the boss? (More people are fired due to personality clashes than for lack of competence in the job.) Was it just a matter of moving up by seniority? Was he the best man available? Did he stab a competitor to get the job? There are many reasons for job changes and some of them not consciously recognized. While each move influences the career pattern, these re-

actions to a move are most important. A dismissal can result in the feeling, "I'm really no good," or, at the other extreme, "I'm right and the company is all wrong." Or, it can result in what's probably nearer the truth. "There are problems on both sides and I can profit by this experience." Understood in this light, job changes can contribute constructively to one's career growth.

'Growing Up'

A fifth career turning point for many young executives in industry occurs when the system no longer moves him along automatically and he is forced to grow up. Assuming he is reasonably bright, is well educated and works hard, the average "nice young man" can expect to *drift* upwards in most large organizations. Talents are in short supply, supervisory and management vacancies arise with happy frequency, and the junior executive only needs to keep his nose clean and show what he can do. Sooner or later the system will reward him with a promotion to middle management.

At this point, however, the system support begins to disappear, and politics rears its ugly head. Suddenly the pyramid has narrowed and only a few prizes remain for many contenders. Just doing a good job isn't enough. For one thing, personal performance is lost in the group effort of the unit or department. The individual contributor who used to shine is now the manager who must get others to help him. Middle management borders on a new world of social status, personal compatibilities, and certain irrationalities: the president must approve all salary actions over \$10,000; Incentive Compensation becomes an automatic bonus; lengthy procedures control field decisions from headquarters; there are rigid rules governing return on invest-

ment; and a host of other rituals and taboos become evident. The young executive once naively accepted many of these practices and tried to live by them, but now he sees them as arbitrary and often self-defeating. The president and key officers, instead of being the wise and statesmanlike leaders of the enterprise, are perceived as only too human. The shock of growing up is often traumatic.

Once grown up, it is necessary to realize that in the "Zero Sum game" of top management, for someone to win, others must lose. This simple fact requires no new math or higher calculus to fathom. Staff meetings, operations reviews, reports on reports, budget allocation discussions—all become arenas where the subtle one-up-manship contest is played out. For many executives this is a make or break turning point. The world of politics, power, compromise and ruthlessness is either beyond their capacity or unpalatable to their ethical upbringing. Little in their home training, schooling or early experiences prepares them for life at the top and, unlike aristocratic cultures, few businessmen today are born to rule. At this point many executives simply withdraw from the game.

Some of these might be persuaded to try for higher positions by some coaching and carefully designed management training. Here much depends on (1) the industry (some industries are "cleaner" than others), (2) the character of the superior (high personal integrity helps), and (3) the training provided (neo-orthodox theology, existentialism or even depth psychology, all illustrate our common involvement in evil; someone must make the tough decisions and keeping

one's hands clean while others do the dirty work is no real out).

Retirement

The final turning point in every career arises at retirement. It is at this point that far too many men go downhill rapidly because they are unprepared or are unable to generate some new career. Most successful executives will not be challenged by shuffle board in Florida. Whether he needs the income or not, he will probably serve on Boards of Directors, teach, consult, write, run a small business, or make the most of a creative hobby. If he has weathered the other turning points of his career successfully, retirement will be no problem.

Conclusion

We have described a career planning process which begins with the individual's interests, abilities and aspirations, rather than the job requirements. The approach outlined is best introduced by a qualified staff man or consultant. Thereafter, it can be turned over to line managers, although some continued monitoring will be necessary. Professor Jay Forrester of M.I.T. reinforced this arrangement in his recent speech on "A New Corporate Design." "Because self-development is so easy to defer, the responsibility for personal growth should probably be shared by the individual and a 'career advisor' whose own compensation depends on the growth and success of his proteges."¹

For illustrative purposes, six of the most common career patterns were sketched, and some suggestions for appropriate handling were offered.

Finally, several key turning points

1. Quoted from *The McKinsey Quarterly*, Summer, 1966, P. 33.

in career development were discussed along with some recommended assistance which companies can provide at these junctures to help managers achieve their fullest potential.

As Peter Drucker has pointed out, companies who rely on a large supply of outstanding executives are doomed to failure sooner or later. The law of

averages is against them. Instead, the real art of management lies in maximum utilization of ordinary men and women. Since these are always in plentiful supply, long term success will go to those who know how to release the energy, zest and hidden potential in all of us.

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