

THE MYTHS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

*career program structure
must be subordinate to
individual development*

"The curse of man has been his aimlessness, his paucity of ideas in regard to his own career, his disbelief in his own powers to shape his future. Let us have a plan, a chart, an objective. Let us determine where we want to go and the best methods of advance."¹

While these words might appropriately be found in the preface of many current career development plans, experience suggests that another well-known statement might be even more appropriate. This statement? "Now that we have lost sight of our objective, we must redouble our efforts."

What is, or should be, the objective of a career development plan? Up to the journeyman level in each occupation, progression is relatively constant and is based upon increasing technical competence. When this level is reached, progress levels out and factors other than technical skill begin to emerge as determinants of future growth.

As the individual progresses beyond the journeyman level, there is increasing commonality between the skills and knowledges he must have and those required in occupational areas other than his own. He becomes more and more management oriented and less and less technically oriented. He never reaches the point where the need for technical knowledge is totally eliminated, but the need for this knowledge is greatly reduced and it recedes into the background. An employee who cannot make the transition from technical to management orientation probably will not progress far beyond the journeyman level. A major function of career development should be the facilitation of this transition.

A CRUCIAL SHIFT

As an individual becomes more and more responsive to organizational needs, he is better able to see himself as a leader, and probably, since managers earn more money, as a manager! Why not? Being a manager is quite attractive

to a bright young newcomer. Especially if he has demonstrated above average technical ability, a willingness to learn, and is able to apply his technical knowledge.

Within many current career development structures, such qualifications are immediately machine-certified with the management seal of approval for positions in supervision and management. Since more and more young people today are assuming greater and greater responsibilities at an earlier age than did many present managers, it is reasonable to assume that our bright young newcomer will become a supervisor or manager without delay. As a supervisor, he is now rated on how well he is able to get people to work. He must now assume the many conflicting roles of a supervisor, and must actively establish objectives, motivate his people, communicate well in all directions, innovate, maintain cooperation, develop subordinates, and make an increasing number of vital decisions.

Our young supervisor suddenly realizes that there is a crucial shift involved in the transition from a competent technician to a competent supervisor. The transition from technical to supervisory or management responsibilities, seldom addressed by the structure of career development plans, is undoubtedly the one work experience in which our young supervisor needs the most help. It is, unfortunately, the most neglected area in career development programs.

We must not continue the practice of assuming that the best technician will automatically become a good supervisor. Concepts of supervision and management must be realistically and honestly communicated to those individuals with potential so that they in turn may realistically and honestly evaluate their own feelings about supervision and management as an attainable career goal.

The tasks of many supervisors and most managers center on problems dealing with a great deal of uncertainty, and yet, we expect our young supervisors and managers to suddenly become

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1. Raymond B. Fosdick *The Old Savage in the New Civilization*, Doubleday, 1928, p. 198

skilled in weighing ill-defined alternatives and engaging in the complex process of decision-making. What career development plan incorporates experiences designed to help the supervisor and manager deal with uncertainty, develop a tolerance for ambiguity, and become more aware of "negotiation" as a valuable management tool? Such a plan is rare indeed.

THE QUANTITATIVE AGE

In our era of quantitative madness, it is not surprising that our career development plans are structurally magnificent. Never has the quality of career development scaffolding exceeded the quality of effort expended on that which is being built or developed to such a degree as we see it today. Detailed and comprehensive manpower inventories, painstakingly maintained on a continuing basis; exhaustive evaluations of individual potential; and long-range, up-to-the-minute predictions of future manpower utilization appear to be, in many instances, an exercise bordering on futility. Career development plans overly preoccupied with individual and precisely pre-defined career ladders invite their own collapse; first, with the burden of staff and paperwork overhead, and second, with *a priori* value judgments about both persons and positions which practical operating requirements too often repudiate.

Large scale testing within career development plans remains fashionable as a, if not *the*, means of identifying the limits of individual growth. The "cut-off" test score has an aura of finality that pervades the entire career development spectrum, and effectively settles an individual's fate. We readily accept as a fact that the management function has been undergoing a revolution at least as far-reaching and certainly as painful, for some managers, as the technological-scientific revolution, yet many career development plans continue to rely heavily on tests whose validity is based on "pre-revolutionary" management thinking. Another point of concern is that single test scores have become the

basis for important career decisions, and have also been used as the sole data source in career decisions.

The proper use of valid and reliable tests can be an important contribution to the immense task of measuring achievement and potential. A strong, continuing, honest effort is needed to ensure that the distinction between psychometrics and psychomania is both identified and respected.

THE ROLE OF TRAINING

Training clearly is one of management's most effective means of assisting and stimulating the growth of an individual in an organization. Further, training can be considerably more than the sharpening of skills and broadening of horizons. Properly planned, it can serve the important functions of developing the respect of an individual for the organization (because it respects him) and of providing management with skilled manpower resources. Training, however, is but one of the elements in a career development plan. Recruitment on a planned basis, a professional placement effort, and merit promotions - all have a vital role in the creation of an organizational growth environment.

The effectiveness of training programs is usually measured by the number of classroom hours, the number of students processed, and by the number of satisfied students. We take extreme care to assure the student that he will enjoy the training we have put together for him, that it will be painless, and that he will get credit for his attendance. We assure management that training is not a panacea - it is, after all, most effective as a recruiting gimmick and is also useful in gathering statistics. After tucking in everyone up and down the line, and after suggesting to all students that they should become involved in the training in every manner except emotionally, we begin our course with something similar to the usual greeting: "Ladies and gentlemen, I need not remind you that all development is self-development."

We implicitly expect our employees to develop themselves, to become properly motivated for accomplishment of organizational objectives, and to generally behave as good employees. We further expect that attendance at our programs will equip them with all the necessary knowledge for improved on-the-job performance. How realistic are our expectations and assumptions? How realistic are the objectives of our expectations and assumptions? How realistic are the objectives of our training programs? What behavioral changes do we expect from our students? Are our training goals related to measureable performance gains? If we come out from behind our defensive positions and objectively examine our collective training efforts we might witness some rather naked accomplishments.

THE ROLE OF TRAINERS

The training function has been undergoing a revolution similar to the management revolution referred to earlier. The training/management revolutions are, in fact, closely related to the technological-scientific revolution, in that sweeping advances in technology have both stimulated and made possible many of the changes in training and in management. This is not an unmixed blessing for those who have gained their training positions through the practice of less precise, less objective training methods. The call in training today is for imaginative and perceptive practitioners. The call has never been clearer or more persistent. We must refine, and develop where necessary, the ability to synthesize knowledge from many disciplines. We must become problem oriented rather than discipline oriented. We cannot afford less.

The tasks of trainers have not only become larger and broader but also have become subject to more influences and pressures, and more exacting because of the expanding impact of training decisions and activities. Traditionally, the long interval between the conception of an idea and its implementation has allowed trainers to eventually "catch

up” to new concepts and techniques. This convenience is no longer with us. Career development objectives are more likely to be attained when responsible managers understand as clearly as possible the nature of the problems training personnel are likely to encounter. Trainers, in turn, are more likely to effectively contribute to the attainment of management objectives if they are expected to possess and maintain technical competence and to operate in a perceptive and innovative manner. To fail to insure increasing knowledge and skill among training ranks is to invite a decline in the capacity to adjust to rapidly changing management concepts. Training directors must exploit breakthroughs in the state of the art of management, including those caused by advances in the behavioral sciences as well as those in the scientific and technical sciences.

THE UNIVERSAL MANAGER

The ability to recite the most desirable traits of tomorrow’s manager has long been a source of great pride to training directors everywhere. Implicit in this adoration is a firm dedication to the development of time-honored character traits within our managers-to-be. Our conviction that all managers must plan, coordinate, and control is imbedded in every lesson plan; our resolution that all managers must be well versed in the human relations movement is legendary. To demonstrate concern for the development of management talent, training directors quickly point to the obvious merit of career development plans as a recruiting device. Management, aware that other companies have such a recruiting aid, quickly offers its stamp of approval and proudly settles back to reflect on its foresight. Armed with brightly colored career development brochures, recruiting teams swarm over, around, and through college campuses talking to every possible recruit, eagerly selling opportunity, and avidly pushing that one vital ingredient for guaranteed growth — a career development plan.

Much like the desire of youngsters to grow up to be firemen or nurses, many young people, about to enter the labor market, have a desire to grow up to be a manager. Employment interviewing in the current labor market consists essentially of assuring the young candidate that if he comes on our payroll he does have an excellent chance to become a manager. The career development plan offers this assurance and everyone is happy.

CHANGE AS A RESOURCE

The elaborate career development structures in current use are obviously intended to produce general managers. The intent is honorable but it is also misdirected. In an age of rapidly expanding specialization we stubbornly cling to the idea that our training should produce general-type managers rather than specific behavior-type managers. Petit² suggests that management behavior is qualitatively different at the technical, organizational and institutional levels. This approach, Petit contends, offers a different basis for classifying managers, according to the kinds of actions and abilities required to operate the firm as an open system striving for rationality and coping with uncertainty. Technical, organizational, and institutional managers can be differentiated according to task performed, point of view, technique employed, time horizon, and decision-making strategy.

Our quest for the universal manager, one whose talents can be pervasively utilized in all functional areas of management, has caused a continual redoubling of effort in career development without the objective in sight. The universal manager is a myth; managers today are functional managers striving to stay abreast of their individual discipline. The current pace of change precludes the multi-discipline approach to manager development, and places unprecedented demands upon training per-

2. Thomas A. Petit “A Behavioral Theory of Management,” *Journal of the Academy of Management*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Dec. 1967

sonnel to prepare current and potential functional managers not only to adapt to change but also to view the process of change as a burgeoning resource.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The call for training practitioners is not a calling for perfection of the means at the expense of confusion of the goals. The quest for managerial talent rightfully remains a continuing concern for anyone whose responsibilities involve training and career development. We must continually remind ourselves that as there are different kinds of work so there are different kinds of managers. Our career development plans must discriminate among various career goals within management and must not entomb individuals in rigid development programs.

The prime opportunity for development is within the individual’s current job. What kinds of abilities does our trainee possess? What abilities does today’s job require? In what abilities is our trainee lacking? This exercise must be the first order of business in the design of career development plans. We must recognize the difficulty of developing any man as a “whole man” — much of today’s work calls for the use of some abilities more often than others.

If we believe that the most valid basis for predicting future achievement is evidence of a man’s past and present performance, we must encourage and reinforce that behavior which develops an individual’s capability to learn fast and to assume progressively more intricate responsibilities. We must, in effect, insure the effective performance of a man in his present position before we begin to think about his potential assignments.

RIGID STABILITY

The unprecedented rate of change in every area of management is a source of continuing concern, so much so that it has forced functional managers to pour heretofore unlimited resources into problem solving activity in an attempt to reduce the distance between the

demands and challenges of change and the capabilities of existing manpower. The art of management itself is changing; it is, in fact, changing at a rate far beyond publication capabilities. The process of preparing and distributing a book on management is now much like the life cycle of a new weapons system. Both are obsolescent, if not obsolete, when ready for use. In an environment of high risk and uncertainty our leaders are discovering that even their philosophies of management are changing with the changing patterns of management. While most of today's trainers acknowledge that times have changed, many still have the feeling that structured, "stable" career development programs have solved and will continue to solve

manpower needs. The fine line between rigidity and stability in career planning has become obscured by the heavy, constant burden of massive manpower inventories, intricate evaluation ratings, and the unfortunate practice of molding current and future manpower needs to fit existing career development programs.

MYTHS AND CHALLENGES

While the practice of management and the art of career development may have changed somewhat, the aspirations of our work force lend stability to the exciting but sometimes turbulent task of training specialists everywhere — the expansion of ability. The many awesome responsibilities of trainers, includ-

ing that of developing performance capabilities, are dwarfed by the fundamental responsibility of ensuring that one does not become the victim of career development, but rather that career development becomes the means by which an individual is assisted in the direction and progression of his occupational development. The emphasis in career development must be on gradual changes in on-the-job behavior.

The myths of career development are rooted in the disproportionate concern with career program structure; the challenges of career development lie in equipping the employee with the necessary knowledge about himself and reality.

BRITISH TRAINING RESEARCH REGISTER AID TO SPECIALISTS

A register of British training research projects, which will help training specialists to keep up to date with research activities and help to prevent duplication of effort, has been published by the Department of Employment and Productivity.

It is the 1968 edition of the *Training Research Register*, which gives details of almost 300 projects, fifty more than the first edition of the register published a year ago under the title of "Industrial Training Research Register." The main purpose of the register is to show the range of research in, or closely related to, training by listing and classifying current and recently completed training research projects.

The register will provide potential research workers with an indication of the scope and extent of existing work, and it will also give some indication of gaps in current research programs. A summary is given of each project. The research has been financed by a variety

of organizations though many are being sponsored by the Department of Employment and Productivity and various industrial training boards.

The *Training Research Register* (HM Stationery Office, price 10/6d. net.) is closely linked with two other publications concerned with spreading information about training research. The *Training Information Paper* series designed to assist the layman by presenting research investigations and their findings briefly and in every day language; *Training Information Paper No. 2* entitled "Identifying Supervisory Training Needs" by Dr. P. B. Warr (HMSO 3/-). The *Training Abstracts Service* offers subscribers a monthly service of about 80 abstracts printed on cards (available from the Department of Employment and Productivity, Training Division, 168 Regent Street, London W.1. at a subscription of L5. 10s. Od. per year). The Department is also responsible for the *Glossary of Training Terms* (HMSO 1967,4/9d).