



The System's the Thing

Organizations, like living systems, depend on their parts for the strength of the whole. Involving managers in a career management system will strengthen the system.

By EDWARD G. VERLANDER

Organizations that take career counseling seriously give themselves a distinct edge in times of rapid change. But unless it is tied to a systems approach, career counseling will remain on the periphery of organization life, its impact negligible.

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An effective career management system (CMS) depends on how well it is integrated with all the human resource functions in an organization (see Figure 1). HRD can be visualized best as an integrated set of sub-systems: the strategic business plan, the budget, HRD resources, HRD requirements and the HRD plan comprised of the reward system, development, staffing, performance appraisal and the career management system.¹ With sufficient and persistent coordination, all HRD activities, pro-

grams and systems should be inter-related, mutually reinforcing and rational.

Closing the gap

Management traditionally backs staffing, performance appraisal and development because of their logical appeal: It's hard to run an organization without people trained to high standards. But career management too often comes in a poor fourth because of the "interchangeability of parts" philosophy practiced by senior management whose desire for rational

management leads them to view their organization mechanistically—as a machine with human parts. (An exception to this occurs in top management. Senior management gets career planning attention because it is viewed as the most important end of the hierarchy. If an organization's board of directors realizes there is a need to breed a new generation of executive management, succession plans are developed, high potentials are identified, special job assignments are made and a general sense of competitive-opportunity behavior emerges at or near the top.) The job of a career management system is to drive succession planning, or job opportunity planning, down through the organization, formalized in human resource management implemented by all managers, supported by HRD.

Succession planning has wide acceptance. However, there is a problem with the term "succession," in that it implies a refilling of existing jobs, growing or replacing people to do yesterday's work (note the common and rather rigid metaphor of a career ladder to climb or career path to follow). Career management, on the other

hand, means planning driven by business strategy—for tomorrow's jobs. The CMS manager tries to make sense out of often competing organizational variables: people's talents and aspirations, shorter product life cycles, service excellence, social and organizational demographic patterns, economic volatility, limited resources of money and materials, industry competitiveness, productivity, market responsiveness, specialization in jobs, and professionalism. During such a struggle for clarity of purpose, an adoptive career management system staff can be a catalyst for change. CMS staff, in effect, becomes a "continuity planner" involved in the organization's health.

The CMS staff role is one of change agent. By selecting wide-ranging targets for change (people, jobs, systems and functions) CMS staff transform an organization. The initial target should be top management, on whose shoulders continuity rests. The CMS staff changes how top management perceives the organization and describes its functioning.

The CMS staff has the obligation to set up systems and plans that tie the human

resources supply to the business strategy demand. The CMS staff must become a catalyst for change across organization-wide systems. Further, special training programs, including one-to-one coaching with managers, need to be created to train all managers to be very effective career counselors. (Figure 2 depicts this dynamic interrelationship.) A career counseling session between a boss and subordinate need not be limited to helping the subordinate decide on a managerial career, but any career.

Manager/career counselor

The ultimate responsibility for making a CMS work lies at the doorstep of each individual manager who must start by understanding what managers really do. Many believe a corporate career means moving from nonsupervisory work to supervising others' work. Sometimes there is an interim step, often called the "working supervisor," who does some of the work and supervises other people to do the rest of it. Having made the jump to supervisor there is nowhere to go but up—ultimately to the executive suite.

Figure 1—Human Resources Development System

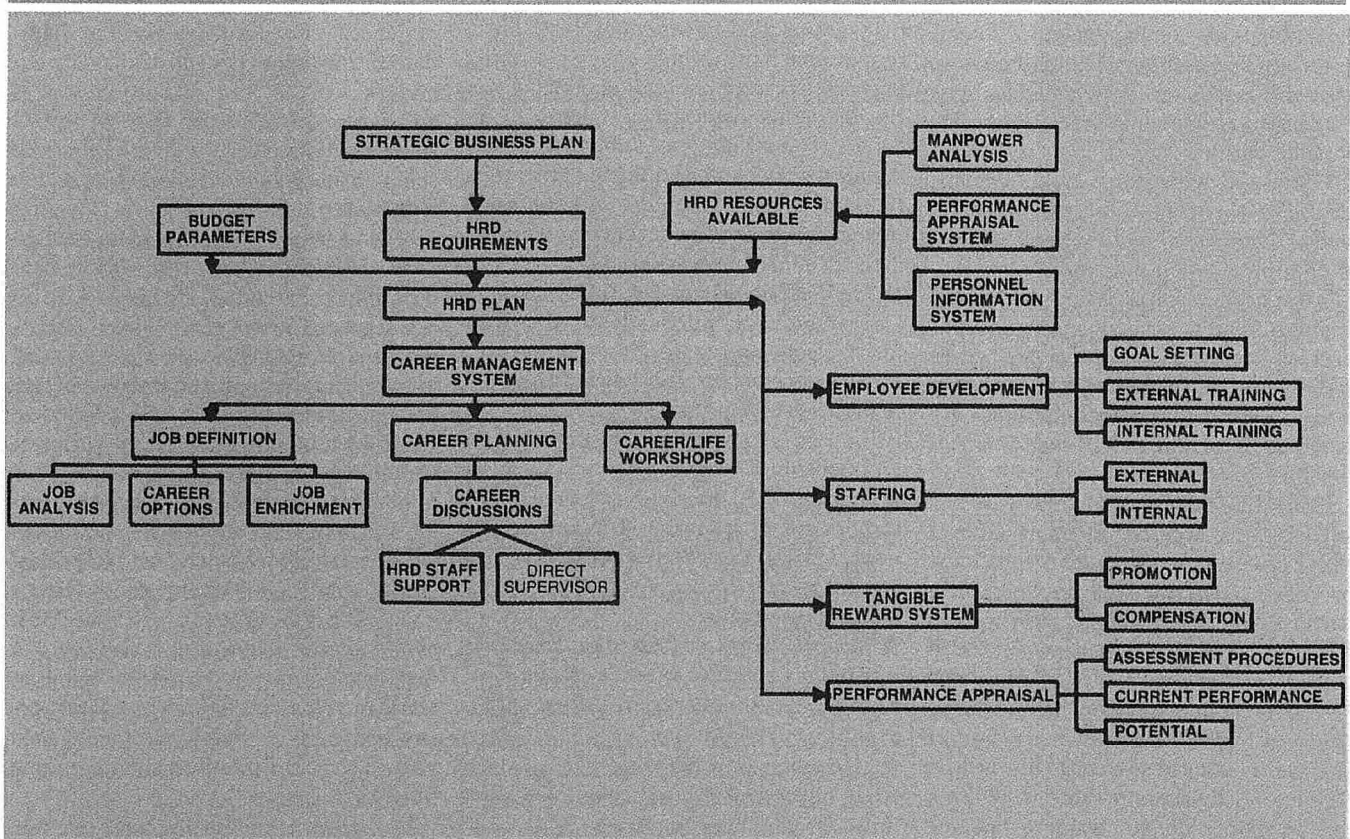
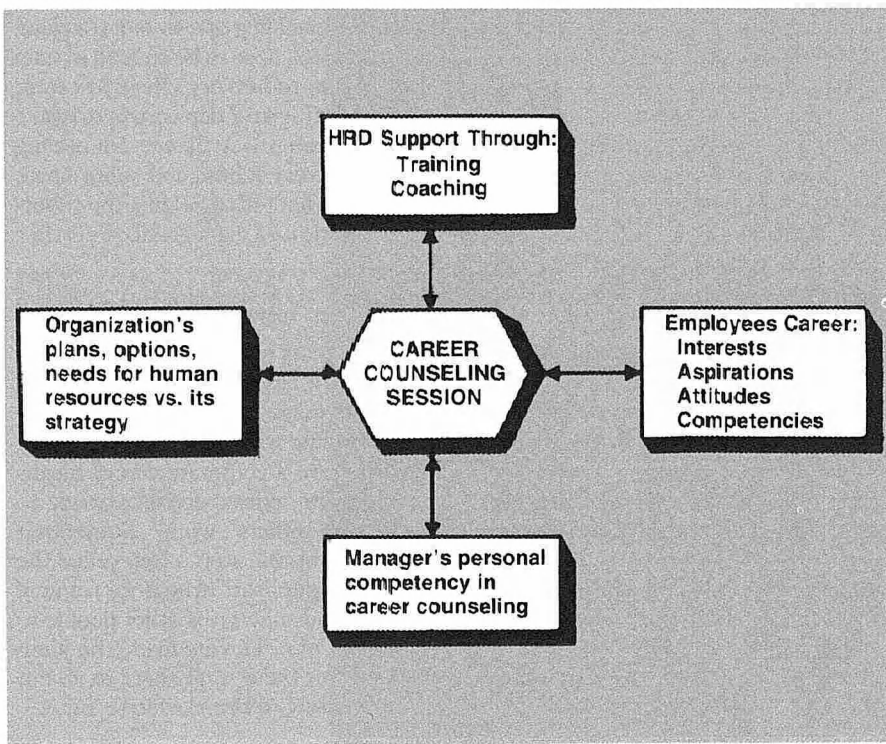


Figure 2—Elements Involved in Career Counseling



But what you get in management often is not what you want. Alone, heady aspirations do little to prepare the ambitious for the ambiguities of management. "We fail to recognize," cautions Leonard Sayles, "that these jobs are very difficult, very challenging and in some cases almost impossible tasks."

"Almost no manager has authority comparable to the responsibility he or she is given. There are multiple objectives—often mutually contradictory."

"Most of what you do is unexpected and involves a great deal of improvisation. Each day is a series of unanticipated crises and events in which the manager is torn... among many competing, unscheduled, unanticipated and often insolvable demands."²

Under these circumstances, why would anyone want a career in management? Some crucial counseling questions must be addressed: How well do we explain what managers actually do? How well do we help aspiring managers decide if management is right for them? How well do we train and develop people to be ready to take a career in management? (It's usually done post-facto.) How well do we continually support those who either fail or simply do not want to become managers?

How can an organization respond? One way, career counseling, bridges the goals of the firm and its employees by making managers skilled career counselors. This requires each manager to develop a competency in career counseling drawing on the elements depicted in Figure 2. A career counseling session requires a manager's sincere commitment to play the roles of helper, mentor, advisor and developer during the several stages of a career counseling session:

■ **Preparation and planning.** The manager and subordinate independently develop ideas, facts and data about company career opportunities, subordinate's performance history and the subordinate's existing competencies (skills, knowledge and behavior).

■ **Initial greeting.** Establish a climate of interpersonal trust, enthusiasm and openness. Manager privately states purpose, structure and process of the career counseling session.

■ **General analysis and discussion.** Examine mutually a subordinate's skill and knowledge inventory, performance, aspirations and options.

■ **Agreement on career options.** Discuss existing competencies and career goal options. If possible, establish skills and knowledge required to achieve ultimate

career goal and all of the intermediate job steps. Realistically decide on next job within the department or organization.

■ **Alternative action.** Specific action steps established to acquire the knowledge and skills for next job and optional action steps over long-term necessary to attain ultimate career goals.

■ **Implementation plan.** Mutual responsibilities agreed on to ensure action steps are fulfilled: scheduled time, sources of skill/knowledge acquisition, costs, measurement of results. Subordinate takes ownership of personal development plan and career action.

■ **Close.** Manager checks for unanswered questions/concerns and creates a positive climate of achievability, common vision and expressed enthusiasm for the action plan.

■ **Follow-up.** Manager monitors and guides implementation plan by further discussion and counseling as needed. Until subordinate leaves department, manager assumes continual interest and responsibility for helping subordinate's career development. Documentation of subordinate's ongoing development is fed back to HRD system.

The most important stage in the career counseling session is general analysis and discussion. The manager must not impose personal experiences and values on the subordinate. Sharing personal experiences is fine. But seducing the subordinate into believing the manager's experience is the best or correct way is anathema. Since career counseling is a subordinate-centered activity, what the subordinate says and desires must be fully explored.

"Ownership" of a career plan for a subordinate occurs when the subordinate describes what he or she would do to achieve a career aspiration. The manager's job, therefore, is to be open to all possibilities, be creative, and encourage, build and develop the discussion based on what the subordinate says. The manager should not narrow the discussion, but rather ask questions that stimulate thinking and judgments about viable options in short- and long-term personal and professional goals, and home-life. Career counseling is the time to probe issues such as the appropriateness and viability of a management career, the balance between work and pleasure, being a specialist versus becoming a generalist, deeply held values, special aspirations and the timing of key life events.

In a sense, career counseling generates an exciting future that has practical value.

Table 1—Concepts and Issues in Career Management

Author/Theorist	Model/Concept	Issues for Career Management System
Ackoff, R. Berlew, D., Hall, D. Boydell, T. Burack, E., Mathys, N.	Systems thinking Organizational socialization Experiential learning Career systems	Interrelatedness of career opportunities Relationship of high expectations & performance Experience-centered learning practices Frameworks, stages and analysis for line management
Friere, P. Gould, R. Hall, D. Knowles, M.	Problem-posing Unresolved dilemmas Career stages Andragogy	Process affecting a person's level of awareness Overcoming blocks to change in adulthood Managers developing the careers of subordinates Helping individuals to become self-directed
Kotter, J., et. al. Levinson, D. Mezirow, J. Montross, D., Shinkman, C.	Self-assessment Developmental tasks Perspective transformation Career choice	Practical skills for managing one's career Factors affecting life transitions in men Helping individuals to be self-reflective Understanding career issues for the 1980s
Raelin, J. Schein, E. Souerwine, A. Stoner, J., et. al.	Conflicting expectations Temporal development The career wheel Four career states	Deviant/adaptive career behavior Matching the organization and individual Strategies to achieve personal career action Understanding and affecting career plateaus
Tichy, N. Tyler, L. Walker, J. Wolfe, P., Kolb, D.	Career change technologies The counseling process Human resource planning Learning styles	Competency, values, style, opportunities factors Approaches to effective counseling Practices in career management Relationships of style and career development

Building such common vision is at the heart of managerial excellence and high levels of motivation.

Bring on the trainer

Since most managers are either unskilled or uncomfortable with the concept and practice of career counseling, some mandatory sessions and workshops can help managers develop counseling competencies. A training workshop that closely simulates reality and provides performance feedback from skilled professional trainers provides the best kind of support. (Table 1 shows a list of carefully selected conceptual models, theorists, practitioners and issues that can be built into an experiential career counseling training session.)

Managers are ready to counsel when they can help their subordinates learn how to:

- become self-directed and independent of the boss' control over the subordinate's career within the organization;
- use all of the career-related resources in the organization;
- define his or her own career issues, actions and goals in terms of the immediate awareness of the cultural, technological

and political assumptions held about the organization;

- take responsibility for overall career strategy planning and action;
- organize past experience into current questions and concerns for future career action;
- make decisions that increase their range of career options;
- solve problems pragmatically through the life of a career strategy;
- reinforce self-image by facilitating progressive mastery over one's life while providing support with feedback to enhance risk-taking and change;
- recognize and seek the benefits of role models, networks and mentors over the life of a career strategy;
- participate in the creation of career contracts with specific tasks, goals and time frames that are challenging and realistically achievable.³

A career management system and career counseling are long-term propositions that ought to be dynamic, flexible and adaptive to the needs of the business strategy and employees' career strategies. Matching business strategy and people demands a proactive HRD staff and responsive management at all levels to make a CMS work.

An effective process hinges on follow-up—constant review and adaptation. When career counseling is fed back into the personnel information system, the career management system stays up-to-date, responsive to changing organizational realities.

References

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